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Maud Franklin

PANTOMIME

By the Same Author

PANTOMIME
SEE-SAW
ETC.

G. B. Stern

PANTOMIME

A NOVEL

29*th* THOUSAND

HUTCHINSON & CO

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To

DION CLAYTON CALTHROP

. . . . "Thy days are mine, dreamer of dreams,
All silvered over with the moon's pale beams:
. . . . . All maids are kind to thee, yet never one
Shall hold thy truant heart till day be done.
Whom once the moon has kissed, loves long and late,
Yet never finds the maid to be his mate!" . . . . .

(ERNEST DOWSON: "*The Pierrot of the Minute.*")

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
	THE CURTAIN RISES! . . .	11
I.	SOME DAY—PERHAPS! . . .	14
II.	CHATTER IN THE WINGS . . .	24
III.	THE PRINCESS AWAKES . . .	33
IV.	FALSE PRINCES BOTH . . .	40
V.	MOTHS AROUND THE CANDLE . .	48
VI.	ENTER THE PRINCIPAL BOY . .	59
VII.	WINGED DRAGONS	70
VIII.	THE TRANSFORMATION SCENE . .	78
IX.	"MARQUISE"	84
X.	THE COTTAGE BY THE SEA . .	94
XI.	VICOMTE	105
XII.	"TOGETHERNESS"	112
XIII.	"HE SAID TO HER——" . . .	118
XIV.	"SHE SAID TO HIM——" . . .	127
XV.	"THE CONSEQUENCE WAS——" . .	137
XVI.	"AND THE WORLD SAID——!" . .	146
XVII.	LE CHATEAU EN ESPAGNE . .	159
XVIII.	A FLOURISH OF LACE RUFFLES . .	166
XIX.	GREEN LIMELIGHT	175
XX.	SILK STOCKINGS—	185
XXI.	—AND THE RESULT THEREOF . .	193
XXII.	THE BALLET OF TIRED QUEENS . .	205
XXIII.	"ALL THE KING'S HORSES . . ." .	217

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXIV.	THE GIRL WHO DID THE RIGHT THING	227
XXV.	AT THE EDGE OF BEYOND. . .	239
XXVI.	MOON-LOVER	245
XXVII.	THE CURSE OF THE THIRTEENTH FAIRY	251
XXVIII.	THE SAUSAGE-SHOP	256
XXIX.	FOLLY	267
XXX.	PANTALOON	277
	THE CURTAIN FALLS! . . .	285

PANTOMIME

THE CURTAIN RISES!

. . . "I'M glad I'm bad!" said the Thirteenth Fairy.

In a perfect ecstasy of laziness she rolled herself over and over on her couch of soft, dry moss. Somewhere, hurrying through space, her twelve good sisters were on their way to one of those interminable and unutterably boring christening feasts—and meanwhile she, the uninvited, could luxuriously close her eyes and listen to the early crocuses growing.

"I'm *very* glad I'm bad!" murmured the Thirteenth Fairy, and relapsed into gentle, dreamless slumber.

"A-tish-oo! ! !" she sneezed violently, once!—twice! thrice!—then sat up with a petulant shake of the shoulders. "You wicked, teasing imp! How often must I beg of you not to tickle my nose with a straw?"

"It's no good, my dear!" quoth the Call-boy with a malicious grin; "you look very comfortable, and I've no doubt you are—but you must bustle along to the feast with your curses, same as usual!"

"I won't!" snapped the Thirteenth Fairy.

The Call-boy indifferently scratched his head just behind the right ear.

"You shouldn't have lost your temper that time over the Sleeping Beauty business," said he. "You established a precedent then. We can't have all the traditions of Pantomime upset now!"

His hearer sighed as she wearily fetched her broomstick. . . .

So scarcely had the Twelfth Fairy endowed little Nan Hartmann with a Romantic Temperament, when a trap-door flew open with a bang! and there, with a malevolent scowl in her eyes, stood the Thirteenth Fairy. In the voice especially set apart for pantomimic curses, she declaimed:

> "You failed to ask me to the feast to-night;
> Upon this sleeping child I wreak my spite:
> Romance, 'tis well—but with it I bestow
> A single spark of common sense also ! ! !
> —Thus she and all of you in time will learn
> A blessing often to a curse may turn!"

"Ha! ha! ha!"

Then: "No, I'm afraid I can't stop," she explained to the Stage-Manager, who was pressing upon her cold meat and sardines. "Important engagement at Merlin's Oak! *So* sorry!"

. . . "And now," grumbled the Thirteenth Fairy, curling herself up again on the moss, "perhaps I shall be left in peace for a little while."

. . . . .

Nan, aged six, was seeing a Pantomime for the first time.

And with eyes fixed solemnly upon the glittering spectacle, her own future began to take upon itself distinct shape.

She viewed it as a broken medley of totally inconsequent scenes, opening with the tinkle of a silver bell, and cut off by a sudden fall of red velvet; as a capering procession of Prince and Jester, Minstrel and Queen, Pixie, Peasant, and White Cat.

She herself would naturally play Principal Girl. From those mysterious wings leading into the Back of Beyond a Principal Boy would presently emerge,

laughing and debonair, with feathers in his hat, and after a few unimportant trials and tribulations they would both take up their dwelling in the kingdom of Happy-Ever-After; of course they would! People were sometimes unhappy, that she knew—but always the Crowd, the Supers, the Understudies—never, never, the Principal Girl! . . .

Nan was very interested in a Demon who worked much evil, and a Fairy who defended the good. It was most convenient that the former should be marked by a lurid green circle of light, and the latter be bathed in rays of glistening gold—otherwise how could the Principal Girl distinguish between them?

. . . The transformation scene was in full swing. Glory after glory unfolded itself, shimmering, rainbow-tinted, till the child leaning over the edge of the box felt that she could hardly bear the glow and throb and colour of it all!

Then, at the very height of wonder:

Flop ! ! ! Bang ! ! !

Down came the drop-scene. . . .

"Here we are again!"—and the audience roared and stamped with delight as Clown and Pantaloon, Harlequin, Columbine and Policeman disported themselves merrily up and down a dingy back-street, in and out of a sausage-shop!

. . . Nan was utterly bewildered; this sudden call to earth was more than she could for the moment grasp.

"It's ugly!" she informed her surrounding retinue. "Tell dem to bring de uzzer back!"

She was made to realize that the "Palace of a Thousand Lights" had vanished irrevocably, could never be brought back.

"Never?" she waxed annoyed; peevish; finally, tearful. She laid the whole mischief to the account of

the Demon, and determined then and there that in *her* Pantomime there should be no sausage-shop!

. . . Good luck to you, Nan! Good luck to you, Princess, Goose-girl, Maiden-all-Forlorn! The stage is set, the bell tinkles—and somewhere behind the scenes the Principal Boy awaits his cue.

CHAPTER I

SOME DAY—PERHAPS!

"HAS anyone seen Nan?"

"Has anyone seen Freddy?" retorted a pretty girl in white, who was pouring out tea on the hotel verandah. "You needn't worry, Mrs. Hartmann, they are sure to be mooning round together on the beach."

Mrs. Hartmann sank into a vacant chair and allowed herself to be waited on.

"She was supposed to do an hour's music and an hour's French every day during her holiday at Dieppe, but since Freddy has been here"—she made a little gesture of helplessness—"I'm sure I don't know what to do!"

Which speech entirely expressed Mrs. Hartmann—she never did know what to do.

"I think them *absolument charmants!*" shrilled a Belgian prima donna, whose bare arms were like quivering bulges of suet; "your little daughter is too pretty when she coquettes."

"And, by Jove, she understands the rules of the game," put in a tall, hook-nosed man named Rosenfelt, "as if by instinct! Now our Connie never seems to know if she is playing with a girl or a boy."

His wife, a very old friend of Mrs. Hartmann, looked

severe disapproval: "I much prefer Connie not to know; it's hardly necessary at the age of ten!"

The man turned away with a slight sigh; like most higher-class Jews, he loved and respected his wife—but he did wish occasionally that her mind were less tidy; it is very fatiguing always to be able to lay your hand on anything you want!

Suddenly, across the hotel gardens on the left, two small figures were seen making their way; the boy slightly in advance, his hands thrust deep in his pockets, and a very freckled and independent nose jerked well in the air. He lounged up the steps leading to the verandah with all the dignity acquired by twelve years of Boston society, and flung himself with a bored sigh into one of the basket-chairs.

"Nan," he explained loftily to the interested group at the tea-table, "Nan is always dangling at my heels!"

A burst of laughter greeted this observation.

"Poor old man! Do you suffer from that already?"

"These women—eh, what?"

"That comes of being a millionaire's son, Freddy!"

"You keep on at it, Nan—it's the only way!"

"Never mind, *petite*, come and share a pink-sugar cake with me!" The good-natured Belgian noted how the child's lips trembled.

Nan, standing dejectedly at the foot of the steps, looked from one amused face to another, and felt that her cup of humiliation was full; with a swift look, half-appealing, half-scornful, directed towards Freddy, she turned her back on the party, and running as fast as her slim black legs would carry her towards a cluster of pines at the far end of the grounds, she buried her flaming cheeks in the cool, short grass.

. . . "I hate him! He's a beast! I never, never, never want to see him again!"—she listened with longing ears for the sound of Freddy's footsteps on her track!

—"No, never again! Oh, I don't understand! I don't understand! He did like playing with me at first, and I haven't done anything! I hate him, and I wish I were dead!"

Nan was very sorry for herself by now. Her head throbbed; she had missed her tea; Freddy did not want her; her new blue muslin frock was getting stained and crushed gainst the damp earth, and altogether she had a vision of such a pathetic, rumpled little Nan that she could hardly forbear from sobbing for sheer pity of it.

During three days, with a great effort, she managed to treat Freddy as if he were as distasteful to her as tapioca pudding, with the result that the young gentleman from Boston began to experience a sudden craving for her society.

"You're going home to-morrow, ain't you?" he volunteered on the morning of the fourth day.

"Yes."

"Back to London?"

"Yes."

"Guess I shall miss you!"

Nan's proper response would certainly have been a toss of the head and a curl of the lip; but, unfortunately, she was playing a game in which—despite Mr. Rosenfelt—she had not yet mastered the primary rules, so she merely looked delighted and gasped out:

"Oh, will you?"

Freddy nodded, and came a step nearer. "Say, be in the garden before supper, Nan, just to say good-bye!"

Nan promised. To "say good-bye" sounded thrilling; the thought of it was with her all day. Towards seven o'clock she managed to elude her governess and slip out to the little clump of trees at the back of the hotel;

the same trees that had witnessed her first anguish at the perfidy of Man!

"I'm here, Freddy!"

Freddy was there, too, with rather vague notions as to what he had come for.

"I'm really sorry you're going, Nan."

"Are you?"

"Maybe I'll see you again—when we're grown up."

"Maybe."

Another pause.

"I—er—just wanted to say good-bye, you know."

"Yes?" expectantly.

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

. . . Was this to be all? Freddy had already turned on his heel.

. . . He looked back. The shadows of a September evening were deepening fast. Suddenly he made an awkward movement towards her—and slipped his arm around her neck. . . .

(Nobody was there to see!) . . .

With another muttered "G'bye, Nan!" he was gone.

Nan stood quite still for a few moments, a curious look of satisfaction in her eyes; she had been kissed —and something told her it was a different kind of kiss to those usually accorded her. Freddy had kissed her because he was a boy and she was a girl! That the embrace itself resembled a blob of jelly thrown on to a plate mattered not a whit.

All of which sentiments, for want of a better confidant, were retailed the same night to an awe-struck Connie Rosenfelt, who the next morning duly passed them on to a shocked Mrs. Rosenfelt, and thence by her to a harrassed, and feebly protesting Mrs. Hartmann.

"If you don't cope with the situation now, Anna, you'll have trouble with Nan later on. Mark my words! I believe she's going to have a temperament."

Mrs. Rosenfelt brought out the last word as if it were a threatened attack of measles.

Unfortunately, Anna Hartmann's brain resembled nothing so much as a complicated piece of machinery working through a tangled mass of Berlin wool. It rendered the task of "coping with the situation" almost Herculean.

However, having great respect for the judgment and educationary methods of her friend (what nicer girls could you find than Louisa and Connie Rosenfelt?), she sought out her small daughter, and proceeded to give her a first lecture on the subject of maiden modesty and circumspection.

"You shouldn't have allowed him to kiss you, darling."

"Why?"

"Connie Rosenfelt wouldn't let little boys kiss her."

"They wouldn't want to!" defiantly.

"You mustn't say that, Nan! Connie is just as nice and pretty as you are!"

Nan gave a discontented wriggle. She could not explain why no boy would evince the slightest desire to kiss Connie, however nice and pretty the latter might be—but she knew it to be true all the same!

"At all events," Mrs. Hartmann wound up, "you're not to do it in future. It isn't right."

"Why?"

"Because God says so," and feeling that she had hereby clinched matters, the good lady quitted the room.

Nan sighed wearily! God stood to her for the Mr. Jorkins of the firm, an absent partner always to be referred to when she put such awkward questions

as: "Why am I me?" or expressed curiosity as to "Things".

"Things!" that undefinable and haunting word standing for all the dark cupboards and mysterious corners of the future. "Things", that lay between the covers of forbidden books. "Things", which were discussed behind closed drawing-room doors, or furtively whispered of in the kitchen. "Things", which produced baby cousins out of nowhere. "Things"—there was no end to the possibilities of joy and terror contained in that one syllable.

"Things" did not exist for Connie Rosenfelt, nor could Nan open her eyes to them.

. . . "You are funny, Nan! Let's go on with the game"—a particularly podgy Princess, in a nightgown and two sashes, Connie lay down on the sofa, whilst the Prince, in bathing drawers and more sashes, broke gallantly through the hedge.

Yes, Nan was funny. To begin with, her nose turned up instead of down! What business had a Jewish girl with a turned-up nose?

Her father, a stolid and worthy Teuton, had died when she was a child of three. Accordingly, Mrs. Hartmann and her small daughter were taken under the protection of his elder brother, a wealthy bachelor owning a large walled-in house on the top of Camden Hill. Here Nan's life was mapped out for her according to the approved standards of that particular little clump of German-Jewish families dwelling in Hampstead and Bayswater; a high-minded and affluent little clump, whose men all turned out to be excellent fathers and model husbands, and whose women were all cultured, elegant—and as ignorant of realities as canaries in a cage.

Nan Hartmann and Louisa and Connie Rosenfelt were practically brought up to the same routine. They

went to school every morning (a carefully selected school, of course), and for a constitutional with their plaintive and injured-looking governesses every afternoon. They also learned to strum on the piano, irrespective of any musical gift they might or might not possess. On Sundays they were attired in dainty and immaculate clothing, which lay all the rest of the week in a bottom drawer of the cupboard. Sunday was also connected with gloves, clean, tight gloves, which had to be tugged over hot hands by an irate nurse, who jerked you and at the same time muttered: "Keep still now, can't you!" Her best efforts could never prevent half an inch of glove protruding at the end of each finger, though every Sunday she went to work with renewed determination.

On second and fourth Fridays, Mrs. Hartmann was "At Home". Nan was sent down to the drawing-room in a silk dress and buckled shoes; and, passing through the hall, Nan dipped her fingers deep into the cream-jug; and Nan was told by ladies, whose faces all looked alike, that she had grown and was the image of her poor father; and Nan's intellect was dished up by her mother on a golden salver and handed round to the visitors.

"What a clever little girl! Will you give me one of your curls, Nan darling?"

Nan thought this awfully silly and rarely troubled to answer: they thought she was shy and repeated the question.

Saturdays she was allowed to invite her own friends to tea, provided, naturally, that these were nice children.

Once a year, on the twenty-fourth of July, the house was filled with a strange musty thrilling smell, which sent tingles of anticipation up and down Nan's spine; the smell of the trunks that were brought down from the attic.

Then after six weeks of delirious joy the trunks would once more be relegated whence they came, Nan's private opinion being that the country or the seaside only existed from July the twenty-fourth to September the third, and was then mysteriously blotted off the face of the earth.

If anyone had asked Nan what was earth's greatest trial she would unhesitatingly have replied "governesses". They were not actively unkind to her at any time, but "somebody always seemed to have done something to them!" Seated at her little black desk, her favourite "think-place", digging chunks out of the wall with a penknife, she turned this depressing phenomenon over and over in her mind, and came to the conclusion that it lay in the fact that they were none of them married. Out of this arose a deep-rooted horror of being herself an "old maid."

"Do you think," she inquired anxiously of the pretty, plump little dressmaker who often sat sewing in the comfortable school-room, "that I'm the sort of girl somebody will want?"

"Bless you, yes, Miss Nan!" replied Jenny; "there ain't no danger of you being one of the left-over ones."

And the procession of governesses following each other at uneven intervals was henceforth mentally ticketed as the "Left-over Ones."

Jenny did not come under this category; she was too rosy and smiling. Also she appeared one day accompanied by a toddling morsel of curls and muslin, which was proof positive.

"I didn't know you were married, Jenny!" Nan had recently discovered that babies were the direct consequence of wedded bliss, instead of the unnatural products of a gooseberry bush, so she wished to air her knowledge.

And Jenny, who really ought to have been repenting of her sins in sackcloth and ashes, only blushed and laughed, looking gayer and pinker than ever, whilst the virtuous and acid disgust of Fräulein Nauheim found vent in an audible sniff.

"Jenny must go!" ordained the Family, when this episode drifted to their ears.

The Family, always to be written with a capital "F", was numerous and stodgy. It was scattered over the residential part of London, but assembled in solemn conclave, on every occasion, with the fidelity of a Scottish clan. Most of It was rich, and a bit of It was poor; some of It was German, and lots of It was Jewish (mildly, not aggressively so). The relationship of the various parts of It, each to the other, was puzzling, owing to intermarriage and a grandfather with three wives and thirteen offspring. It had a great affection for birthdays, weddings and funerals; and It regarded the most secret affairs of every single member of It as common property. Individually, It did not exist; as a whole, It was the force that turned the world—Nan's world.

Nan used to answer It cheekily, and thrust forward her opinions unasked; none of her cousins—first, second or fourteenth—offended in this manner. Nan must be very severely repressed!

"They like me to come out top at school, all the same!" she indignantly informed her Uncle Hartmann.

"Of course, my dear, all children do!" replied Uncle Hartmann—which was absurd, on the face of it.

"Well, then, if I know things at school, I must know them at home! I can't pack my brain away, and only bring it out to win the History Prize, can I?"

But this was precisely what the Family did expect of her.

And thus, guarded by the impenetrable spears of moneyed and cultured respectability, Nan left her childhood behind and entered into the teens. Life stretched before her so level, so secure, so unalterable, that wonder almost ceased to be. She had watched girls in the same set as herself go to school, grow up, make their début, marry someone with assured means, bear two or three children (less than two was unwomanly, more than three, improvident!) and start them in their turn trotting round the everlasting circle.

Over the line of this circle faint echoes sometimes drifted from the world outside—a world of strange happenings, and the clash of conflicting events; a world of creators who produced books, pictures, music—but these were Other People! one only heard of them; a world of tired bodies that toiled and toiled for the privilege of keeping enough life in them to toil once more—but these were Other People! one never met them; a world of wild, rebellious souls, who sinned and suffered and loved, and sinned for their love, and suffered for their sins—but these were Other People! one could not know them.

. . . In one of those pleasant, drowsy old gardens that abound on Camden Hill, a child, clad in a dull red cotton frock, lazily swings herself against the luminous early autumn foliage. The swing faces a high brick wall, beyond which can be heard the busy hum of the street—but the child must long ago have discovered that the cords of her Pegasus are not long enough for a flight affording a glimpse over the top of this barrier. So she rocks monotonously backwards and forwards, her hands linked in her lap, one toe scraping the gravel path, and a deep, deep inward look brooding beneath her straight fringe of heavy dark hair.

"Some day . . . perhaps." . . .

CHAPTER II

CHATTER IN THE WINGS

THE first girl, having reached the corset and petticoat stage of undress, stood before the mirror, cold-creaming her neck and shoulders. Her blue-ribboned underwear was very torn in places—places which had been made glaringly apparent by the red-threaded embroidery of a tactless laundry.

The second girl lay already in bed. Her nightdress fastened plainly round the neck with one big linen button, and her hair was intersected with twists and horns of newspaper—mysterious instruments, destined by their magic touch to convert native lankiness into a bewildering crop of curls.

The third girl was kneeling, fully clad, on the window-seat; her back turned to her companions and her eyes straying over the hushed, twilit garden below.

"Aren't you going to get undressed, Nan?"

. . . At the far end of the lawn, the river took a pale gleaming curve, like an outward-beckoning arm. . . .

"Aren't you going to get undressed, Nan?"

. . . The stillness which always reigns where there is water was for the moment broken by the plash of oars. Then silence again. . . .

. . . "Nan, aren't you going to——?"

Nan swung round, and seized a pillow from the bed nearest her.

"Say it again if you dare!"

Connie Rosenfelt was capable of reiterating her question fully a hundred times if the nine-and-ninetieth

time failed to elicit a response; but, quailing before the unlifted weapon, she compromised with a weak:

"Well, aren't you?"

"Not before I choose!"—impatiently. "It's such an awful waste to go to bed!"

"Waste of what?"

"Of—of *me*!"

"You are funny, Nan!"

"I know what she means!" chimed in the girl at the looking-glass. "I know just what she means! She feels like having a high old time with somebody."

Nan winced. Put into bald language, this was exactly what she did mean—but most of us prefer our sentiments shrouded in a rose-coloured mist.

As for Connie, she fell to wondering, not for the first time, what could possibly have induced her mother to invite this horrid, common Cuckoo Somers to stay with them at Greylawns. The explanation was simple, had Connie but known! Cuckoo's father had once been the most fascinating man in Kensington; even Mrs. Rosenfelt had one blessed human weakness tucked safely away beneath the fall of years.

. . . Reluctantly Nan quitted the window; it was not worth while to quarrel with Connie; after all, the latter was her hostess—Nan was spending a month at Greylawns, the rambling riverside house rented by the Rosenfelts for the summer, whilst her own mother went to Carlsbad for the cure, and Uncle Hartmann ineffectually did things with a rod up in Scotland.

Cuckoo, squatting comfortably at the end of Connie's bed, watched with unconcealed envy whilst Nan loosened the dark, heavy plaits of hair which hung below her waist.

"My word, Nan Hartmann, but I'd like to be you with all that hair. There's somebody going to have a treat one day."

A hot flush swept over Nan's cheeks; Cuckoo's innuendoes were fascinating, though at times incomprehensible. Now, however, the implied suggestion was understood!

"What on earth do you mean?" piped Connie; "you are funny, Cuckoo!"

"So are you!" rejoined Cuckoo. "It beats me how anyone can bear to make such a fright of themselves every night as you do; just look here!" She caught up a hand-glass from the bureau and held it before the other's round, dumpy little face, with its tight crown of newspaper ends.

"What does it matter? Nobody sees me!"

"We see you, don't we? Nan and I! It hurts us!—and your husband will never recover from the shock, I should say."

"Cuckoo, how can you!" the victim's face, between embarrassment and fury, had assumed the hue of a ripe beetroot.

"Well, one ought to be prepared for everything."

"Then would you like him to see you with your chemise in holes?" cried Connie, stung to retort.

"That wouldn't worry him much; if the skin were white enough underneath!" Cuckoo smiled complacently, aware of her strong point.

"It's lovely—like snow!" murmured Nan, envious in her turn. "Mine is as brown as a nut!"

"Never mind. It suits your style."

"Would you call me pretty, Cuckoo?" Nan stood expectant, with poised comb, while Cuckoo studied her carefully.

"Not always; you're too pale, and your mouth is too wide. But evenings you seem to light up from inside;

and—I don't know—you don't look English; it's your blue eyes with those very straight black eyebrows. It's almost better than prettiness."

"I call it silly to talk about our looks!" interrupted Connie from beneath the bedclothes. "Time enough when we come out."

"Sounds as if you were a pair of unhatched chickens, you and Nan. When do you 'come out', then?"

"Next year—after the school in Germany—when we're eighteen."

"I suppose your people will have some fellows about the place then!" yawned Cuckoo. "I haven't seen a pair of trousers since I've been here—except the gardener's!"

"What about Fritz Baumgarten?"

"Pooh, he's not a fellow, he's a German!"

"Why do you call men 'fellows'?"—the term always grated on Nan's ear.

"Why ever not?"

"It—it sounds like a housemaid."

"My mother's mother *was* a housemaid!" Cuckoo sprang from her seat on Connie's knees, and kicked off her shoes into opposite corners of the room. "There! That's made Connie Rosenfelt curl up her toes! Fancy, a housemaid! Shocking, isn't it? And now you'd better turn your face to the wall, Miss Particular, because I can't possibly undress in that wonderful way of yours!"

"What wonderful way of hers?" queried Nan, amused.

"Haven't you ever noticed? She slips on her night-gown *over* everything else, then does some sleight-of-hand operations, and all her other clothes slide from beneath it on to the carpet! Now I—I always have a short interval between the taking-off of my chemise

and the putting-on of my nightgown. I've tried the other way, but the strings get themselves knotted."

A knock at the door.

"A letter for you, Miss Hartmann. Come by the last post. Shall I push it under the door?"

"Please, Emily."

Cuckoo, being nearest, picked up the square of white and passed it to its owner, with the comment:

"Ceylon stamp!"

"Ceylon?" Connie sat bolt upright. "Why, Nan, it must be from that boy we met last spring at Lausanne; he came to the school-dance. Mary Winter's brother—what was his name?"

"Donald." Nan seated herself slowly on the broad window-sill, one leg tucked beneath her, and a rich carmine deepening the olive of her skin. The letter lay unopened in her lap; she wanted to be alone with it; to dream, to anticipate, to tantalize her longings. But——

"A love-letter!" cried Cuckoo eagerly. "Oh, Nan, dear, darling, beautiful Nan, open it quick and tell us what's inside; I'm dying to know!" She flopped to the ground and laid her fair head against Nan's knee. Connie too, forgot that she was sleepy, and, rolling out of bed, pattered across the room and peeped curiously over her friend's shoulder.

Gone were all temperamental and social differences. Vanished like mist before the sun. There remained three girlish hearts stirred with an echo of the same world-melody, six warm young lips brushed by a fallen feather of the boy-god's wing.

And Nan read aloud:

My darling Nan——

"How funny!" giggled Connie; and, "Shut up, Connie!" commanded Cuckoo.

My darling Nan,

I said I would write to you, and you see I've kept my word. How are you, dearest? It's ripping out here if it weren't so beastly hot! Do you ever think of me? I've got a ripping bungalow and three dogs, a motor-bike, and one double-barrel 12-bore gun, one 22.25-shot repeating rifle, one .450-bore army revolver, and a handful of knives and things.

Write to me soon, won't you? I say, do you remember the dance on my last evening? Why wouldn't you kiss me good-bye?

Yours lovingly,
Donald.

P.S.—I love you!

. . . There ensued a long pause.

"Does that mean," inquired Connie breathlessly, "that he's going to marry you?"

Cuckoo giggled—and the momentary spell was broken.

"Well," said Connie, offended, "he writes that he loves her, so he must want to marry her!" She gazed at Nan with as much awe as though a circlet of gold were already gleaming on the third finger.

"Nan, why wouldn't you let him kiss you?"

"Because—oh, Cuckoo, one can't!"

"Can't what?"

"That sort of thing."

"Why not? There's nothing in it?"

"That's just it; there ought to be something in it. There must be, or they wouldn't want to?"

"Who wouldn't want to?—fellows?"

Nan nodded. "Men."

"Wouldn't want to what? You are funny, Nan!" This of course was Connie.

Nan suddenly sprang to her feet, and, crossing to the door, switched off the electric light. The room was plunged in total darkness save where the moonlight glimmered on three white patches, silhouetted softly against the window. Three sighs of relief fluttered on the air, and three voices rose out of the dusk with less hesitation now that the other's faces were invisible.

"It's the same thing at dances, and—oh, everywhere. Even if they don't, you feel they are wanting to—and—one doesn't know what to do!"

"But, Nan." Connie's voice fell to a shocked whisper. "We *do* know! Of course we must never, never allow a man to kiss us unless we're engaged to him! Mother says——"

"Yes!—but she never says why, does she?"

"There's no harm in a little fun!" said Cuckoo. "Most girls do."

"Most girls don't. Not nice girls. Not girls like us."

"That's all you know, Connie Rosenfelt! What's in a kiss, anyway?—it amuses them, and doesn't hurt me."

"But does it amuse you too?"—from Nan.

"Not so much, naturally. Men are different."

"How? In what way? Tell me, Cuckoo! You know more than I. Reading doesn't count when real things happen."

Yes. It was the old problem of "Things" again. Of what ought to have been familiar furniture, shrouded in white covers till the aspect was mysterious and terrifying.

"I—I don't know that I've thought much about it!" hesitated Cuckoo. "There are men and women, of course! . . . and one mustn't let a fellow go too far."

"But," said Nan, "just how far is too far?"

Connie wriggled uneasily. "Nan, do you think we ought to talk about it?"

"No. But I'm going to. We're for ever thinking about it, so it must be important! And when we ask questions, we get hushed up. Go on, Cuckoo."

Connie slipped away to bed and muffled her ears in the pillows. It was her typical attitude towards life.

"Well, Cuckoo?"

"What?"

Nan began to laugh. "Have you ever played hide-and-seek in the dark? You grope about, and bump into corners that can't be seen. That's what you and I are doing now."

. . . Silence again. The gurgle of waters lapping the banks, the chirp of a cricket below the window. Nan gazed straight before her, her elbows planted firmly on the window-sill, and her face supported by the cup-like hollow of her hands.

"Cuckoo, I do so want to be wanted!"

"One day perhaps you will be."

"Of course!" replied Nan, serenely conscious of the Principal Boy in the wings. Then, chuckling softly: "Connie's gone back to bed!"

"Have we shocked her?"—in a whisper.

"I daresay. I believe she's dead!"

"Dead!" Cuckoo glanced in a startled fashion towards the bed.

"No, no, I don't mean really. But nothing seems to excite her. She never wonders. I do. I'm wondering now if we shall meet in ten years' time and think of what we've been saying to-night. I love looking forward to myself looking backward!" Her voice sank lower. "I suppose by then I shall—know. Cuckoo, do you ever feel as if you *must* have something, and not have the faintest idea what it is you want?"

Cuckoo was utterly out of her depths. Nan and Connie and the world they represented were an eternal puzzle to her. Mr. Somers—his wife was dead—associated principally with a careless artistic crew gathered from all quarters of the globe, governed by no special code of laws, and so accustomed to what Nan viewed as the dark mysteries of life, that they rarely bothered to discuss them, just as others take for granted their three meals a day. With this jumble-sale of humanity, Cuckoo was a great favourite. With them she felt at home, but here——

She could find no better answer to the last question asked of her than Connie's familiar phrase:

"You are funny, Nan!"

Which utterance drew from them both a peal of laughter—whilst a drowsy voice from the corner demanded when they intended to "stop chattering and go to bed?"

"Very well, Sleepy-head! Good-night, Cuckoo. Switch on the light as you go out." Cuckoo slept in a room at the far end of the passage.

The effect of the sudden glare after the dimness was disconcerting. The two girls avoided each other's eyes. What had they been saying?—whatever it was, they wished it unsaid.

"Good-night, Connie."

"Good-night, Nan!"

. . . As the door closed Nan experienced a swift sensation of being alone in a strange world. Connie had rolled herself over on to her side with a drowsy grunt. The sheets on the other bed were turned back, as if beckoning its occupant to enter! . . . Was this all that the night offered her?—the night, which dyed her cheeks a rich scarlet, and brought a deep glow to her heavy eyes! The hot August night! No, she could not go to bed; not while this sense of something yet

to happen clung about her! What a—"What a *lump* Connie is!"

Donald's letter, a square of white on the dark carpet, caught her eye. She read it through again, reproaching herself for the vague disappointment with which it filled her. He said he loved her—and the statement left her cold. If this was love, then love was not what she wanted! . . . What did she want?

. . . For a few moments she stood at the open window, revelling in the caress of warm air upon her uncovered body. So might some daughter of the East have leant brooding into the night; a daughter of the East, slender of hip, with rounded limbs kissed by the sun to a deep golden-brown. Her hair clung heavily about her shoulders and waist, as if loth to quit their dark embrace. . . . How still it was how intensely still. Not a leaf, not a blade of grass stirring.

When the world slept one could hear it breathing softly through the tree-tops—but now it stood on tiptoe, wide-eyed—expectant—waiting. . . .

CHAPTER III

THE PRINCESS AWAKES

NAN was late the next day at the breakfast-table. As Cuckoo had remarked, she did not look her best in the mornings, and the consciousness of not looking her best caused her invariably to appear at her very worst—heavy eyes, pallid complexion, sullen mouth, slovenly toilet. Where was the young Diana, drunk with life, of the evening before?

As she passed to her seat Connie informed her that

a button was loose on its thread, an important button, by which hung the destiny of the whole dress.

"Did you know that it was nearly off, Nan?"

Nan helped herself to an egg.

"Nan, did you know that it was nearly off?"

"Yes"—snappishly.

She became aware that the Rosenfelts were regarding her curiously, pity and triumph struggling for supremacy in their gaze. A letter from her mother lay on her plate; it took some time to decipher, owing to Mrs. Hartmann's eccentric caligraphy, each work starting off with the best of intentions and then left in the middle to find a way out by itself.

"Mother says I'm to come home at once—how queer! I thought she was off to Homburg to-morrow. Has she written to you, Aunt Bertha?"

The last-named lady murmured something inaudible, and pressed fishcakes on Nan so warmly as to suggest that this might be the girl's last good meal on earth.

Mr. Rosenfelt himself drove her to the station, bought her a comic paper suitable to the intellect of a child of five, and bade her cordially good-bye.

He said nothing about returning again.

Nan sat in the train, with eyes fixed on the scurrying landscape. Why had her mother sent for her? It was unexpected—and the Hartmanns did not do anything unexpected as a rule. The house on Camden Hill would look so smug and ponderous in the blazing sunshine, particularly the dining-room; the dining-room was upholstered in brown leather, with brown velvet hangings, and some forefathers—not so far removed as to be picturesque—stared with dull eyes from their heavy gilt frames. Next year the furniture would be cleared away, and a drugget laid over the carpet, for next year Nan was "coming out," and that meant a ball, and the introduction of what Cuckoo

called "fellows." Would she be allowed to invite Cuckoo?

"I don't suppose mother will like her much, but if I say I met her at the Rosenfelts——"

"Paddington!"

. . . Mrs. Hartmann was in her bedroom when Nan arrived, and Mrs. Hartmann informed her daughter that they were ruined and it was disgraceful to have driven through London without gloves!—all in one breath.

For a moment Nan wondered if the first disaster were a direct consequence of the second—then she saw that her mother had been crying.

It irritated her!

Ruined?

It seemed quite natural. She had so often read of exactly such a scene as this, that it held no surprises for her. What ought she to do? Weep and cling to her mother? Stand like a still white image? She chose the latter course, as giving for the moment least trouble, and fixed her eyes on a dusty golden shaft of dancing motes, while Mrs. Hartmann, in a muddled, untidy fashion, explained what had happened.

Matters were neither as terrible nor as picturesque as they had at first sounded; indeed, the story was so common-place and oft-told that Nan almost wished her mother would be silent, and allow her to continue the narrative herself—she could do it so much better!

. . . "But your poor uncle would put all his money into this new venture—and mine too!—without consulting a soul about it—though if I had known things were going so badly I would never have run up such a big account at Whiteley's—the one which made him so bad-tempered that Saturday evening—though I thought at the time it was his liver, and told cook

about the stewed eels being too rich—and now he says we have only four hundred a year left between us—and I suppose we ought to be thankful for so much."

"Shall I have to work for my living?" interrupted Nan. "Four hundred a year" carried as much meaning to her as when we read of an income in francs, and have to strike off noughts, and divide by twenty-five, and perform other mathematical gymnastics ere the figures bring conviction with them.

Mrs. Hartmann held up her hands in horror at the notion. Work? Never, if she could prevent it! A daughter of hers! Whatever would Bertha Rosenfelt say! "If only it had happened a year later, so that you could have had your chance to marry well."

"My coming-out dance! Won't we be able to give it?"—the question came from Nan with a sudden gasp.

A fresh outburst from Mrs. Hartmann at the selfishness which would at a time like this dwell on such a triviality.

But it was not selfishness. Merely realization of the full extent of the change in her fortunes.

No coming-out dance?

No bed to lie on?—it would have been equally startling.

Then was this not an interesting and rather a pathetic chapter in a book? Nor was she a sympathetic audience at the sorrows of Other People. This thing was happening to her—to Nan Hartmann—to the Principal Girl! It was incredible, dizzying.

She slipped upstairs to her little black desk to recover from the shock.

A fortnight later the little black desk was sold with the rest of the furniture; then the house at Camden

Hill went, and life became indeed a whirling phantasmagoria of unfamiliar shadow-shapes.

Uncle Hartmann had long cherished a secret wish to travel. This financial crash practically set him free from the duty he owed to Society (as represented by Bayswater, Hampstead and Maida Vale). Mrs. Hartmann was also amicably excited at the prospect of visiting foreign countries—provided she did not leave Europe! Europe could always be relied on for a certain amount of respectability; outside Europe, "one never knows!"

Nan, having practically completed her education, would naturally accompany them.

"But, mother, where shall we live?"

"We shall move about from place to place, dear. You'll like that, won't you?"

"But—one must have somewhere to come back to! where shall we *live*?"

"Just wherever we fancy."

"Like gipsies?"

No, not like gipsies. Gipsies were not nice people at all.

So the Hartmanns became vagrants without the charm of vagabondage; wanderers lacking in the sense of adventure; Philistines in Bohemia.

They stayed in second-class hotels for the most part; private hotels, clearly distinguishable from third-rate boarding-houses where sniffing servant-girls and foreign meat were the order of the day, and just removed from first-class palaces where the idle rich luxuriate for a few months every year. First to France, then on to Italy; London again in the spring, and for Nan a return to something like the old life and old associates. Then, just as she was growing accustomed to it, off again—Belgium, Switzerland—always the beaten track, always on the move, and always faces, more faces—and unutter-

ably strange, chilly passages leading to strange, chilly apartments. Change itself became monotony, and Nan gradually learned the routine of Arrival by heart—she was acquainted with the precise point at which the cheery urbanity of the hotel managers would, on learning the price Uncle Hartmann proposed to pay, merge into aloof superiority; she could tell exactly when they would reluctantly give way; she was drearily familiar with the trudging procession up the stairs; Manager, Mr. Hartmann, herself (laden with small hand-baggage), Mrs. Hartmann, and the porter with the large trunks bringing up the rear. She knew her room so well: a wardrobe, a dressing-table, a washstand, a picture over the bed, and a chair and table in front of the window.

Next followed the unpacking, and the disposal of her various treasures and books about the chamber, in the hope—poor Nan!—of making it look more like home. Then a voyage of trepidation down the bare corridors past the closed blank doors, to a crowded, over-heated dining-room. Dinner on the first night meant a prolonged discussion on the merits of the food compared with that of the hostelry just quitted. Finally, an awkward rush through a crowd of chattering strangers, past a volley of inquiring eyeballs, back, back to the sanctity of "my own room."

After the first few days matters were wont to improve; faces took unto themselves names, and were no longer formidable; the neighbourhood revealed unexpected beauties and amusements, one formed friendships, fell into regular habits—then up again! Another journey! And a repetition of the whole weary business.

Nan felt as if everybody were settled in a particular little groove of their own, and only she were being dragged perpetually over the ruts; she was a betwixt and between; a perpetual onlooker; a square peg being driven by force into various little round holes; an exile

from the land of convention, with the shackles of convention still cramping her limbs.

Strange people wound themselves, like many-coloured threads, through the pattern of her life—even as they had capered in the motley tinsel procession of the pantomime—handsome, bold-eyed women, furred and jewelled; melancholy, foreign aristocrats; artists and students of all sorts and kinds and conditions; the flotsam and jetsam of humanity, scarred and bruised from the fight; lovers in various stages of the disease; gems from Whitechapel and Jerusalem; atheists and fanatics; workers and drones; dreamers and jesters—they all contributed their iota towards the evolution of Nan, and then passed on—into the wings.

From them she learned that wrong on certain occasions was not wrong, but right, and that there were a thousand graduated tints lying between dense-black and snow-white in Humanity's paint-box; people could not be lumped up in two classes as good or bad—stupid or clever—married or unmarried; there were fine distinctions, especially in the last item; signposts did not stand at every cross-road pointing out: This way to Heaven. This way to Hell!—Nay, a good many eloquent tongues were employed in rending Heaven and Hell to tiny fragments.

Nan felt like an edifice from which the ground-floor had been violently removed, leaving the upper storeys wobbling uneasily on the wreckage!

And, strangest discovery of all, everybody was so busy playing principal in their own pantomime that they had no time to come and play super in hers.

CHAPTER IV

FALSE PRINCES BOTH

After three years of this existence Nan began to wonder when the Principal Boy would put in an appearance. Donald, having found guns more absorbing and, on the whole, less dangerous than girls, had long since faded from her horizon. She could boast of a genuine proposal since then: Rechtsanwalt Thorwald Weinberger, dancing merrily at the Homburg Casino Ball, caught a sudden glimpse of a pair of blue-green eyes under the shadow of a big black hat, and straightway fell in love—a most un-Teutonic proceeding! He duly manœuvred an introduction to the owner of the eyes, clicked his heels—and deluged her for a fortnight with bouquets and chocolates.

Nan rather enjoyed it! At the end of fourteen days he laid at her feet his income, his prospects, and himself. Nan, astonished and immensely flattered, picked them up. Whereat he embraced her tenderly, called her his "Kleine Braut", and departed to interview Uncle Hartmann.

Two nights later Nan woke up in a frantic state, unreasoning terror, tumbled out of bed, marched straight into her mother's room, and declared that Thorwald Weinberger must be informed at once, immediately, and without delay, that she could never, never, *never* marry him. With difficulty Mrs. Hartmann persuaded her that the morning would do for the delivery of the message.

Thus Thorwald became once more an eligible bachelor in Homburg; and flaxen-haired Greta Sanders, who had (with many tears and "Ach Gotts!") confided to her

sister Elsa that her heart was broken—Greta fished out the discarded lozenge with "Thorwald" written across it in marking-ink, and again wore it around her neck.

The German had made a premature entrance. He was not Nan's Principal Boy.

A few weeks preceding Nan's twentieth birthday, chance landed the Hartmanns in a very third-rate boarding-house in Folkestone; they had been extravagant abroad, the balance must be restored again. Uncle and Mrs. Hartmann found a couple of congenial bridge-players and did not take much note of their surroundings. Nan knew vaguely that something was wrong. It was not the stuffy, mustard-papered passages—the crumpled, spotty tablecloths—the prevailing smell of cooking; no!—but the company was cheap as well: fluffy damsels afflicted with a shrill giggle, callow youths, with loud voices and ties to match, middle-aged ladies with dyed hair, men with "failure" written large across them, a general atmosphere of laxness, music-hall jingles, and clasped hands——

And then Kenrick Marsden.

Marsden was essentially a man of the world. A large portion of his career had been spent in the East; now he had returned home to marry—to marry money. His betrothed, then in Lancashire, was many years older than he, and blindly, adoringly in love with him. He himself was no chicken: an enemy might remember him as a man of over thirty, ten years ago. Women were his hobby; all those that rewarded study he pursued closely; the rest he left alone, for he was something of an epicure.

Nan attracted his attention immediately. He told her fragments of his life, of a woman with pale gold hair who had been his companion for a strange, mad, happy year in Burmah. Nan was repelled, but fascinated.

He called her his "little Sphinx", and had a way of regarding her, a half-smile in his bold blue eyes, which made her feel her clothes transparent.

Seeing that she was at that stage where the tender green of the fruit is flushed by the first tinge of rose, he assisted Nature by lending her books—books that instinct had up till then bade her leave alone; but she devoured them now, as the only means whereby to satisfy the restlessness that attacked her whenever Marsden was not present.

On his last evening in Folkestone—he was to be married the following week—he and Nan were seated on the window-sill of the stuffy little front drawing-room. Far away twinkled the blurred lights of pier and parade; the sound of the sea swinging sullenly on to the stones could faintly be heard. Inside the smell from the gas fire mingled with the odour of bad tobacco and sickly perfume. Three girls lounging on the sofa were frantically applauding the efforts of a hectic young bank-clerk to dance a comic break-down; he was in the first grip of consumption, but disarmed sympathy by his persistent bad punning. The beads now glistened on his forehead—he paused to take breath—then the stamp of his heels started again, while the piano tinkled feeble accompaniment:

"I used to sigh-igh-igh-igh
For the silvery moon——"

From the adjoining back parlour angry voices arose in dispute over a lost trick in a doubled no-trumper.

Marsden drew closer to his silent companion and quoted a few lines from Le Gallienne's *Prose Fancies*.

"'At Elim are twelve wells and seventy palm-trees . . . they still make a mirage to the mind of the

mysterious mossy walls of old wells, the delicious plash and echo, the sleepy sunlight stealing on tiptoe through the tendrilled patterned shade to kiss with sudden glory some little darkling fern . . . quenched thirst and all the great green shade'. . . ."

The words came like a cool breath on the squalid, over-heated atmosphere. His voice was low and musical. Nan half shut her eyes and felt his hand clasping her arm; she did not resent it; they talked on and on. Gradually the other occupants of the room, with many a noisy jest, trooped upstairs to bed. There was a scuffle on the landing—the loud smack of a kiss—shrill cries of: "Oh, don't!" . . . A comfortable old woman with three chins was the last to depart; being a friend of the landlady, she considerately turned down the light before going: "Florrie was grumbling over the gas-bill only yesterday!"

. . . The room was deserted, and almost dark. The swish of the waves sounded nearer. Marsden strolled to the piano and started turning over the music, humming carelessly the while a melody from *Carmen*. Nan would have to pass the piano on her way to the door. The situation was stale to him; to her it was wonderfully new! . . . She rose at last, half-frightened, half-expectant, her never-failing dramatic instinct recognizing a fellow-actor who would not let her depart without an effective "curtain".

"Good-night!"

. . . The air tightened like an elastic band ready to snap. . . .

He put both his arms around her; she leaned back a little, pressing against them with all her might; her face was turned upwards to his. He kissed her. A strange, sharp happiness galloped through her veins like fire. The kiss was unlike any she had as yet received;

it drew a response from her own lips—the first ever given; she marvelled at herself—but it leaped out spontaneously.

Then, with burning mouth, and a hammer beating unevenly up and down in her breast, she ran swiftly upstairs and bolted herself into her room.

The next morning Marsden returned to London. Six months later, questioned by a mutual acquaintance, he confessed to a very vague memory of "a little girl down in Folkestone, who was fond of lying on rugs!"

Nan was left utterly miserable; this was not the Principal Boy either, and yet she had given away what she had been jealously guarding for him, and him alone. And the background had been so squalid, so commonplace, so different to the limelit, poppy-grown dell in which Prince Charming meets his Princess and confesses his love for her!

She spent long mornings on a deserted part of the beach, reading over and over again those books which Marsden had bequeathed her as a parting gift; they quieted her for the time being—then the feverish tumult would start again with fresh vigour. New thoughts, new longings perpetually invaded her brain and crowded it with dimly-looming shadows. . . .

She had not even liked the man, but she wanted him to kiss her again—wanted it badly—and, curiously enough, enjoyed the sense of want!

She had no home ties, no settled occupation to counter-act a state of mind which was rapidly becoming morbid. . . .

—"Why, if it isn't Nan Hartmann!"

Nan mentally calculated that the skirt-width of this exquisitely-clad vision would go exactly twice and one over into the hat-brim! Then, springing from her seat against a tumble-down breakwater, she cried:

"Cuckoo!"

"That's me all right!" responded Miss Somers, with a dash of American accent that was somewhat unaccountable, but very effective; she picked her way over the pebbles and sat down beside Nan, idly taking up the volume which the latter had been reading. . . . A quick twinkle appeared in her eyes.

"Hel-lo! You've come on a bit since our last little chat in Connie's bedroom!"

It was like Cuckoo to plunge at once into a subject which would have taken Nan fully a week tentatively to approach.

They were soon talking away at a great rate, explaining, comparing notes and experiences, laughing at memories of Connie Rosenfelt and her curl-papers. Cuckoo was initiated into the present causes of Nan's discontent, and promptly suggested a remedy.

"You've got nothing to hang on to, that's the trouble —too much time to think. Make your people let you join Forrest's Academy of Histrionic Art, where I am now. You like acting, don't you?—it's ripping good sport! Do!"

"They would never allow it!" gasped Nan.

But she was wrong. The Great Public was at that moment being swept off its always unsteady feet by a new idea: namely, that the much-maligned Stage was a pure and dove-like profession bathed in rays of trembling white light, in which no black germs of evil could possibly exist. It was a reaction from the current belief that the Stage was a hotbed of vice and vanity.

So when on their return to London Uncle Hartmann laid the proposition before the Family there was not such an outcry as might have been expected. The Family prided itself on being broad-minded.

"Who did you say was the founder of this Academy?" asked a cousin-in-law.

"Michael Forrest," replied Uncle Hartmann; then added: "Sir Michael Forrest. He's been knighted, you know. By the King."

Yes, they knew! Two actors had been knighted within the last four years, which proved that there could not be much wrong with the Stage.

"All prejudice!" said an uncle, sweeping away Prejudice with a wave of the hand. "We mustn't be prejudiced. The Stage and—ah—the Pulpit!"

Under that heading a discussion was just then raging in *The Times*—if anything can be said to "rage" in those stately columns!

"The Royal Family goes regularly to the theatre," volunteered another uncle, and a third drew attention to the numbers of professional men—yes, and stock-brokers too—whose daughters were being trained for Serious Drama.

The aunts were also favourably inclined towards the new project. Were not the weekly journals full of photographs and anecdotes representing the domestic life of footlight favourites? Groups of husband and wife and children and dogs and gardening? What could be nicer?

"I suppose," inquired an aunt-by-marriage, an Important Aunt, "that this Academy where you propose to send Nan consists of demonstrations of the Theory of Elocution; lectures and so on."

"I suppose so." Uncle Hartmann was doubtful.

"And—the young men? Are they divided from the girls, or do they all work together?"

Before this question could be dealt with a third cousin chipped in.

"*Can* Nan act?"

Yes. Certainly Nan had a talent for acting. Was she

not regularly chosen at school prize-givings to recite "The Quality of Mercy", and Gray's "Elegy"?

Besides, rushing about from one hotel to another, with no regular occupation, was hardly the right mode of existence for a young girl. And, further, argued Uncle Hartmann, there was no reason why she should not, by her efforts, improve the lowered state of the family exchequer, which lately——

The Important Aunt-by-Marriage hastily cut him short; one did not obtrude these uncomfortable circumstances!

"Ah, well, she can but try it. Perhaps, after all, she will marry!"

"Yes," in a hopeful chorus, "perhaps, after all, she will marry."

The conclave broke up.

And thus it came to pass that when Cuckoo returned to Michael Forrest's Academy of Histrionic Art, Nan, with a beating heart and an exultant feeling that here at last was a hold on something tangible—Nan accompanied her: down the grey old street near Bloomsbury, and up the worn steps of the building where a great brass plate shone above the knocker. A kindly-faced, grizzled sergeant, in a battered uniform, opened the door to them. In the hall they parted company, Cuckoo to link arms with a throng of laughing, noisy, eager-faced students, Nan to enter a large, bare room with a group of silent, over-awed, tremulous fellow-victims, there to await her entrance examination.

CHAPTER V

MOTHS AROUND THE CANDLE

Some eighty students, all young, eager to work, confident of sooner or later setting the Thames ablaze, and resolute to start their career with: "A good speaking part in London, nothing less!"—that is the first term.

Some fifty students, older by six months of experience, slightly inclined to slacken their efforts, still hopeful of firing a tributary, if not the Thames itself; but willing enough to accept, "A leading rôle on tour—such a useful grounding!"—that is the second term.

Some thirty students, older by twelve months of joy and anguish, working feverishly, with temporary lapses into don't care moods of idleness; outwardly more gay and confident than ever; inwardly resolved on securing an engagement "Of any sort!—London, the Provinces—walking lady or gent, with an understudy of eight lines—only not to be left behind in the great race!"—that is the third term.

And then they scatter. And one perhaps shoots to the top like a comet, and within a couple of years three or four new names become familiar to the public ear, and comrades airily remark: "We studied together! Oh yes, I always knew he had it in him!"

. . . And the others?—the great majority? Some are still casually heard of as toilers in a third-rate company of the road, some have dropped out of the fight, have married, and forgotten that mad, merry year of fun and good-fellowship; and some—ah, well, they are ships that have passed in the night!

That is what it means to become a student at Sir Michael Forrest's Academy of Histrionic Art.

. . . . .

The Little World was bounded on the North by the big fireplace; on the South by Mrs. Chick's pantry; on the West by three windows and a bird-cage; on the East by the photograph wall. South-east was a door leading to the Great World upstairs; and outside the windows buzzed and boomed the World That Didn't Count.

For the Little World was the Academy kitchen, presided over by Chickabiddy, the genial Sergeant's wife. Hither came the students to eat, and rest, and laugh and riot, and play out their own private bits of comedy and tragedy, and that most tragic of all comedies which is known as farce; here they confided to one another their hopes, ambitions and disappointments. Here, in short, was their kingdom.

The Great World upstairs was the world of work. At nine o'clock every morning the Sergeant rolled back the gates and admitted into Paradise the clamouring Peris outside; at seven o'clock every evening he was heard shouting along the passages and into the cloak-rooms: "Come along now, can't ye? An' I waitin' to clear away your litter an' lock up for the night! I believe ye'd be sleepin' here if I let ye!"

The days passed in a breathless succession of classes—acting-classes, fencing-classes, dancing-classes, make-up-classes, elocution-classes—tempered by hastily swallowed meals, private rehearsals, matinées, visits from some "big gun" of the profession, violent efforts to learn seven parts all at the same time, performances in the miniature Academy Theatre, and so on, till weeks resolved themselves into months before Nan could realize the headlong flight of time.

She was happy. She was part of something belonging to something, and, best of all, she had no leisure in

which to lay out her happiness on the dissecting-table and prod at it. True, she had not yet been able to distinguish herself particularly in her chosen vocation, but her chance was coming—coming soon—and then——

No more problems! No more yearnings! . . . The Little World was bounded on the North by the big fire-place; on the South by Mrs. Chick's pantry; on the West by three windows and a bird-cage; on the East by the photograph wall. South-east was a door leading to the Great World upstairs, and outside the windows buzzed and boomed the World That Didn't Count . . .

On a certain bleak afternoon in October, in Nan's third term at the Academy, the dark oak beams and grime-shadowed corners of the kitchen were lit up by a blazing log-fire, which leaped in Rembrandtesque fashion over the intent young faces scattered about the room. With particular delight did the flames linger on a mane of red-gold hair, whose owner, Mara Morgana by name, sat astride of the dresser and carelessly prompted a wild-eyed Hungarian stumbling through a speech from Browning.

Down the centre of the room about twenty students were gathered round a long deal table; and above the clatter of knives and forks rose unceasing calls for "Chickabiddy!"

"Chickabiddy, I've been waiting hours for my chop!"

"Buck up, Chicken, if you love me! I'm due at rehearsal in three minutes!"

"Chickabiddy, I've got no knife! My mother taught me always to eat peas with a knife!"

"Chicky, I've only got twopence-halfpenny in the world! What can you give me for that? Salad and cake? Right-o!"

"O-o-o-h, aunty! I've spilt the gravy!"

This last brought Mrs. Chick with a bounce out of the pantry. A fine amazon of about forty summers

was she, worshipped by all the students, but particularly by "the boys", for whom she kept the warmest corner in her capricious heart. Now, finding that the offender was a certain mischievous young favourite of hers, who persisted in naming her his "long-lost-aunt", she followed up a torrent of angry words with a playful box on the ear—and a promise of more gravy! Jerry then gravely accused her of mixing water with it, for the sheer joy of seeing her clothe herself in honest wrath.

"Clean my hands always is!" announced Mrs. Chick with emphasis, "and clean they always will be!"—and meekly her tormentors accepted the theoretical worth of the statement, for literally it would hardly be correct!

An ugly little chap with wistful eyes and a wide mouth was doing an improvised clog-dance round and round the table, roaring at the same time the Drinking Song from the *School for Scandal*. Bumps was a magnificent low comedian, but his heart was wrapped up in a tragedy of his own composition—undoubtedly the most tragic tragedy pen ever yet put to paper!

> "Some rosy shape gontinuing the beach
> Gurved beewise on its bough" . . .

declaimed the Hungarian, von Rabinger, with contortions of visage that suggested a severe attack of gastronomic pains. Browning is hard on a foreigner!

"What does that mean, *hein*?"

"I'm sure I don't know," replied Mara, indifferently kicking her long black legs against the side of the dresser. "Bumps, how does one curve beewise on a bough?"

"Dunno—but it doesn't sound respectable—

> "Here's to the flaunting extravagant Queen,
> And here's to the housewife that's thrifty!"

An interruption from the Great World: "Class C. for rehearsal at once in Room Seven!"

Class C. reluctantly quitted their meal: "Leave it there till I come back, Chicken!" and departed.

In the corner near the fireplace a dark, beautiful girl laid a detaining hand on the sleeve of the man who rose from beside her.

"Need you go, Geoff?"

"No. They must do without me."

He flung himself down again on the rug at her feet. Geoff looked out of place in this atmosphere of tinsel and grease-paint; his bronzed face, square shoulders, and steady blue eyes, belonging by rights on the decks of a great liner. Thora, too, had been a disturbing influence from the first; she had passed through the sacred portals on false pretences, owned frankly that she wanted a "lark" and had no special liking for Histrionic Art. Disapproving young eyes watched the enamoured couple—wondering how it would all end! Very rarely was romance allowed to interfere with the stern business of the hour; as a rule, man and maid were too busy discussing how and when to embrace in a mock love-scene to have any thought of turning it to a real one. They were singularly unconscious of sex, these aspirants to the laurel wreath, and inclined to resent the intrusion of pretty speeches except those of Shakespeare, Ibsen or Pinero.

The door (South-east) was burst open to admit Nan; Nan, bubbling over with some secret cause of mirth.

"Jerry! Is Jerry here?"

"He is! I've been looking for you, Nan! Where have you been hiding?"

"In the bathroom." Nan swung herself on to the dresser beside Mara, and proceeded to share that damsel's last remaining sandwich.

"I have news!" she announced between the bites.

"Gather round, ye votaries of Melpomene, for verily I have news!—the Affinity has gone to have his hair cut!"

"No!!!" in various accents of amazement and incredulity.

"Is it official?"

Nan nodded: "William's orders!" (William being the long-suffering Administrator.) "He sent for the Affinity to-day; 'My dear Montagu', sez he, with his inimitable tact and courtesy, 'If you wish to play Lord Ferraby on the twenty-ninth, you must really be shorn first, or the audience will take you for an organ-grinder. I don't object to raven locks when they cluster lightly round the shoulders, but when they threaten to encroach upon the waist-line——' "

"Rot, Nan! William never said all that!"

"He probably said: 'Get your hair cut!'" admitted Nan; "I'm only putting it nicely for him. The Affinity went up to the bathroom and wept with his head in the basin. I found him there, and he transferred his head to my bosom—feel how damp my dress is!—and talked about Brutal Tyranny! Then I lent him sixpence to go to the barber's, which is why I have to do without lunch to-day—and he's gone!"

There was much laughter at this recital.

"All the same, I'm glad the Affinity, and not Lytton, is playing Lord Ferraby," put in a vivid-looking creature with the genius of a Bernhardt and the coarseness of an orange-girl; "Lytton played his passionate scenes with me like the New Curate cutting a dash with the Rector's Wife!"

"Oh, nobody here can play emotional parts like the Affinity!"

"And Kathleen Farquerson!" Jerry glanced up sharply. "That reminds me, has anybody seen Kathleen to-day?"

"No, nor yesterday either. She's been queer this term! Is anything wrong with her?"

"Kathleen's a genius; they're always unexpected," quoth Bumps easily.

"Ask the Sergeant, Jerry. He'll know where she's to be found, if anyone does."

Nan spoke truly. It was the Sergeant's business to know everything, see everything, do everything. His varied duties included answering the bell, cleaning the windows, setting scenery, interviewing parents, hooking costumes, prompting from the wings, scolding the noisy, encouraging the down-hearted, repairing breakages, converting a ginger-beer box into Gretchen's spinning-wheel, and last, not by a long way least, keeping his temper. All of which duties he managed to perfection.

"Ask the Sergeant, Jerry."

"Too much bother," responded that youth, stretching himself lazily—then: "Hullo, Eggs! Whence the excitement?"

"I've got a shop!" breathlessly announced the young actor who had just entered the kitchen.

"When? Where?"

"Eggs, you lucky beggar!"

"Tell us, quick!" all minor issues were swamped in a common interest.

Eggs—he owed his nickname to the fact that he possessed a brow like Shakespeare's, Bacon forming the connecting link!—Eggs, hugely enjoying himself, told his tale:

"I heard that the great Forrest was engaging supers for *Othello*, so I went down to the theatre. You should have seen the crowd!—about two hundred out-of-workers, I should think. He walked up and down, staring at us in that concentrated fashion so peculiarly his. When it came to my turn he glared so long that I

felt I must do something, or yell! So I waggled my left ear at him.

"'That's very clever!' drawls the mighty Forrest. 'Can you do it with the other ear?' 'Yessir,' sez I—and does it! 'You'll get on, my boy!' and engaged me right away! Chicken, I'll have a pork pie in honour of the occasion—I've been living on lettuce till I've longed to sleep in a hutch!"

"Perhaps," suggested Bumps. "He wants you to play the donkey that carries Othello to the wars!"

There was only one dissenter from the general chorus of congratulation: a crouching figure, seated with her back to the rest of the room, and her fingers stuffed in her ears, engrossed in one of Ibsen's dramas. Poor plain, undersized Janie Cathcart! What wonder that she railed bitterly against a fate that invariably cast her for "slavey" and "charwoman" rôles, when she longed to shine as Cleopatra or Hedda Gabler, Sappho or Francesca! "And I shall play them one day—you see if I don't!" she would declaim fiercely.

Around the gas-jet, a solitary moth beat its filmy wings in ever-narrowing circles!

"Let the toast pass!
Drink to the lass!
I warrant 'twill prove an excuse for the glass!"

carolled Bumps joyously. He paused to applaud the realistic representation of a woman being strangled in her own hair, with which pastime two of his fellow-students were improving the shining hour.

"Don't, Jimmy! You hurt!"

"Lean further back, then!"

They were interrupted by a shriek from Chickabiddy:

"God bless my soul! Who are these?" for her domains had been invaded by a band of ferocious-looking Irish

Fenians. The leader embraced her tenderly and demanded Albert biscuits.

"Come along, some of you!" cried another red-nosed ruffian without a crown to his hat, "We ring up for *The Shaughraun* in four minutes, and there's nobody to do 'Shouts behind'!—How's my make-up?"

"Great!—I say, is Kathleen Farquerson upstairs?"

"Haven't seen her. Why?"

"Someone wants her."

"Are you chaps ready?" shouted a strident voice from above, and in a few seconds the kitchen was quit of half its laughing, rowdy occupants. From time to time bursts of applause echoed faintly from the Great World upstairs.

"Nan, come and be strangled! Vi's sick of it—and her hair is so short!"

"Not I! I've been stabbed in the back twice—that's enough for one day."

"Has William been down here this afternoon?" demanded the Orange-girl.

"Yes," laughed Mara; "I was here. He came to see about that room next door. It's going to be set apart for 'Ladies Only'!"

"Good! That will turn out to be one place at least where we males shall be free from the girls!"

"Jerry!" The offender was instantly ejected into the passage by a feminine bevy of indignation.

A heavy step on the stairs announced the advent of a clumsy-looking damsel who might have strayed out of a country farmyard. She was, however, one of the Academy's most talented and popular members. But now her round, jolly red face was serious.

"Philippa! Is Philippa Merrick here?"

A classic goddess, who wore green velvet and sat about in shapes, glanced up languidly from her book.

"Yes! What is it?"

"Mr. Bennett wants you at once." The use of the more formal title in place of "William" struck a grave note into the light chorus of voices.

"Wants me? Why?"

"I—don't know."

"Faith, is anything wrong?" Nan drew closer to the farmyard girl, lowering her voice. Faith Trevenna waited till Philippa had passed out of earshot, then:

"It's something to do with Kathleen Farquerson. You know they 'dig' together. I believe Philippa has been worried about her lately."

"No wonder. Do you remember that night at the theatre—how she shrieked with laughter, and sang the whole way home?"

"And then for a week nobody could get a word out of her," chimed in Thora from her corner.

"Where *is* Kathleen, anyway?" asked Bumps, whose special pal she was; "I haven't seen her for two days."

"She told Philippa every morning that she was coming on later, and when Phil got home she found her still lying on the bed."

"Hm! Queer!"

"Queer!" Eggs exclaimed impatiently. "Nonsense. She needs a good talking-to, that's all. You girls would persuade anyone they had a temperament, when it's only temper or temperature."

A groan greeted his epigram: "O-o-o-h! Oscar Wilde at his worst!"

Cuckoo Somers suddenly hurled herself into the room, and a rush of nervous excitement communicated itself from her to the others, before she had time to open her lips.

"Have you heard?" she gasped; "Kathleen Farquerson! . . . there's something wrong. . . . Nobody knows what. They sent round to her 'digs' to inquire why she hadn't come to rehearsal."

"Well? And?"

"I don't know!"

Nobody seemed to know.

"Eggs, go and see what you can find out."

A nameless terror was fast settling on the Little World. Something had penetrated from the World That Didn't Count. Something chill and cold!—Almost peevishly they tried to shut it out—to resume their careless, absorbed chatter of masks and mummers. In vain! Every ear was strained, every eye watchful.

Eggs soon returned. He shook his head.

"Sergeant would know, but he's closeted with William. So is Philippa. *The Shaughraun* is hung up; they're all waiting about the stairs and landings. I believe——"

"What do you believe?"

"I don't know," muttered Eggs.

Mr. Bennett was heard imperiously calling for Chickabiddy. She hurried out, wiping her hands on her apron.

. . . Everyone sat immovable, like a life-scene suddenly crystallized into a waxwork. Little knots of men and girls wandered in from the interrupted performances, the paint still on their faces. They tried to talk as if nothing were impending, their voices trickled away into silence, smothered by the weight of the air. . . . The clock ticked louder every minute. A reminder went up for the five-o'clock elocution class, but nobody stirred.

Then Mara burst into a storm of sudden tears.

"This is awful!" she sobbed.

Faith Trevenna slipped her arm round the child's quivering shoulders:

"Hush, dear, hush; don't make a noise." It was as if she feared to wake something. . . .

Bumps started softly humming under his breath: "Here's to the maiden of bashful fifteen!"—became

aware of his own voice, and stopped, affrighted. The silence hung thicker. . . .

The door opened quietly and Jerry entered.

"Kathleen Farquerson is dead," he said. "She killed herself this morning."

CHAPTER VI

ENTER THE PRINCIPAL BOY

"Be sure to come round to the Studio to-night, Nan. There's going to be an inauguration feast."

"Yes, but look here—I ought to be rehearsing for to-morrow."

"Nonsense! What's to-morrow?—Oh, only Shakespeare! You can easily gag if you dry up. Do come! Johnny June will be there."

That decided it, and Nan promised.

Johnny June was not one of the students; nobody could remember whose friend he had originally been, or who had first introduced him into the Little World, but he had become one of their permanent stage properties, indispensable upon every occasion. His chiefest use, as he himself put it, was that of "the chap in the play who is talked at through three acts so that the audience should know what it's all about!"—in other words, Johnny was that rarest of all things, the perfect confidant. "He will listen to you jawing about yourself for hours, and never want to talk about himself for a change!" said Eggs, when first describing to Nan this jewel amongst men, and she found him all that and more; for Johnny had a particularly weak corner in his heart for young girls; he was always ready with an attentive ear for all their troubles, amorous and other-

wise, and quite reconciled to the fact that never, under any circumstances, was he himself the hero of one of these exciting histories. Not that Johnny was plain to look at—far from it!—but then he was just Johnny, beloved of everyone, but nobody's love.

In desperation, then, had Johnny discovered in himself an unexpected gift for the one profession in which he could sustain both sides of the conversation at the same time. He became a ventriloquist.

"Good! At seven o'clock or thereabouts. And bring some buns with you!" added Eggs, as Nan hurried away. "Will you come, von Rabinger?"

"Thank you, no," replied that gentleman with dignity. "I am going to fry some fish."

"Going to fry some fish?" repeated Eggs in a puzzled tone—but Cuckoo jerked him forcibly, whispering: "He has other fish to fry, goose! Don't laugh at him, he's so touchy this morning." Then she asked in a louder key: "What's all this talk of a studio, and why haven't I been invited?"

Eggs prepared to be imposing: "The Students of the Second Division of the Final School, finding that an indifferent management has not provided sufficient accommodation for the private rehearsals of a zealous community——"

"Cut all that!" interrupted Cuckoo. "You've hired a garret, is that it?"

"A spacious apartment, my child, of which the doors will to-night be thrown open to anyone bearing in their arms an 'Open Sesame'; in other words, to anyone who brings grist to the mill; in other words, provender! grub! peck! tuck! fodder! in other words——"

The entrance of the fencing master stemmed a flow of eloquence which might have been prolonged indefinitely. From which it may be gathered that the prevailing high spirits of the establishment had not suffered a lasting

shock from the death of Kathleen Farquerson. Already the event had become remote and shadowy to her comrades; what was past had no claims upon them—they lived in the present and in the future. The causes of the unhappy girl's suicide were not generally known. There were rumours of the inevitable man—of desertion—an overdose of veronal—but the hints were not taken up; the affair was too crude, too real! It jarred upon the students of art, as a rush of hard daylight will destroy the effect of a carefully made-up face. As Hedda Gabler behind a row of footlights, the death of Kathleen would have been fully appreciated—but actually to kill herself was resented as theatrical—melodramatic!

. . . . .

The Lay Figure, left behind by the owner of the Studio to guard his interests, raised eyes of blank astonishment at the scenes of unwonted hilarity taking place that evening. He himself had been adorned with a bowler hat, and a parasol placed in his hand—"That none need blush at his nakedness!" explained Bumps.

A huge fire blazed in the open red-brick grate; a raised platform, haunted by the ghosts of weary models, creaked beneath the weight of a square table on which the company had deposited their "Open Sesames". A bag of shrimps jostled in a friendly fashion against a basket of hot-house peaches, whilst a plate heaped high with cold sausage and a box of *marrons glacés* took curious stock of each other's eccentricities.

There were no chairs, but the floor, steps and mantelpiece offered excellent seating accommodation. Nan and Jerry had taken possession of the bearskin in front of the fire, whilst Philippa Merrick, elected hostess for the nonce, lounged in queenly lines upon a brocaded throne. Eggs, her deputy, stood near the door, and, with kid

gloves covering his hands, greeted each entering guest with some fresh absurdity. One girl wore a dark blue fencing costume; another was radiant in white satin and pearls. Bumps, for some unexplained reason, had appeared in Eastern garb and struck a note of vivid colour from his squatting position beside the eatables.

A haze of curling blue cigarette-smoke lent to each face a soft wrap of mystery; a constant volley of jokes ran from mouth to mouth, gathering sparks in their onward career. The popping of corks mingled with snatches of song and the loud bang of cracker-squibs. Here was Bohemia!—young Bohemia!—robbed of none of its golden glamour, and with no undercurrent of privation and disillusion to wail in a minor key; these exultant young visionists spent their lives studying drama and tragedy from every point of view, and knew no more of them than a child, enthralled by a game with tin soldiers, knows of the actual horrors of warfare.

"Nan, is it a fact that you are playing Rosalind to-morrow?"

"Only the Forest scenes."

"It's your first really big chance, isn't it?"

"Yes. Throw me an apple!"

"Here you are!—Nervous?"

"N-no!—only I wish it were tragedy. Tragedy's my line."

"Don't you believe it, my child," Bumps broke in wisely. "Every woman thinks she can play tragedy, till she loses her waist-line—then she wants to be coy and frolicsome."

"We're not women, we're actresses!" retorted Nan—and believed it. She brought the peeling of her apple to a triumphant close: "All in one piece, too!" and, springing to her feet, raised the long, curly green strip preparatory to indulging in the old-fashioned formula.

A pause chanced to fall on the chattering groups, and for an instant, Nan, with uplifted arm and the firelight dancing on her flushed intent face, became the centre of attention.

"One! two! three!
Who will my true love be?"

she chanted, and hurled the peel over her left shoulder. It struck full on the chest of the foremost of two men who at that critical moment flung open the door; rebounding thence, it fell to the ground, wriggled uneasily, and was still.

"It's a P."

"No, a T!"

"Nan Hartmann, whom do you know whose name begins with a T?"

Nan's thoughts flew to Thorwald, and a mischievous smile gleamed in her eyes as she mentally placed him amidst her present companions.

Johnny June, for the intruder had been he, advanced further into the room.

"Don't you think from this angle it looks more like a J?" he inquired sentimentally. "Thanks for your hearty welcome, Nan; I thought a bomb had burst when I felt the apple-peel crashing against my breast!—Ah, Queen Philippa, I kiss your feet!"—he turned to the youth behind him: "Come in, old chap; no ceremonies here!—I've brought a pal, boys; do you mind?"

. . . . . .

. . . Immense consternation reigned behind the scenes. Carpenters bustled to and fro, dropping their tools; supers whispered in excited knots; the Stage-Manager wiped warm drops from his over-heated brow—and in the right-hand corner of the orchestra a stout figure sat wrapped in peaceful slumber, with hands still clutching at his great brass instrument, and full

red cheeks even now puffed out as in the act of blowing; a gentle sound came at regular intervals from between his parted lips. . . .

"What are we to do?" demanded the Assistant Stage-Manager frantically; "he won't wake up!"

"I told you the orangeade was too strong!" murmured the Comic man.

"But the whole thing is impossible!" bellowed the Writer of the Pantomime. "The Principal Boy *can't* appear without a flourish of trumpets, or how is the Principal Girl to know that he's him?" he waxed ungrammatical in his agitation.

"Well, it's too late now to make a fuss," said the Prompter philosophically, "because he's on!"

. . . . . .

"The stage is a rotten profession!" announced Johnny, who, having been fed, and adorned with a gold paper crown, now lay like a pasha on the bearskin, surrounded by a bevy of adoring maidens.

"What price you, then? Cast not a moat in thy brother's eye for in thine own there is a——"

"Drawbridge," finished Johnny. "Yes, but my case is different; some have greatness thrust upon them—and I didn't want to be a stomach-talker!"

"A what?"

"That's what they call me in Germany! I wanted to be a bus-driver and hold the whip, but they're all old and hoary, and whilst I was waiting to grow hoary, motor-buses were introduced."

Johnny's fair-haired young friend, who squatted in the background and crunched *marrons glacés*, now sat up and took notice:

"Talking of motors, what about Saturday?"

"Oh yes—I forgot. Listen, you girls! This boy owns a cowshed for the—the—what is it?"

"Eastchurch Gordon-Bennett Annual Aviation Cup Meeting,"—promptly.

"For—what he said," resumed Johnny. "And I've just received his permission to bring down in my car any pretty maid I choose. I don't wish to cause bloodshed, so:

"Eena! deena! dina! doh!
Catch a nigger by his toh,
If he hollers let him go"—

(The boy watched the perambulating finger breathlessly; evidently there was one pretty maid on whom he was particularly anxious the choice should alight!)

—"Eena! deena! dina! *doh*!"

The last word fell to Nan.

(A light shot over the face of the boy who was apparently so preoccupied with his *marrons glacés*.)

"Will your people allow you to come?" Johnny had been formally introduced to the inside of the Hartmann *ménage*.

"Oh yes! They would let me go anywhere with you, Johnny dear."

"Of course!" quoth Johnny gloomily. "I'm used to that compliment. Dunno why it is, but everybody thinks I'm to be trusted. I'm not."

Polite smiles of disbelief all round.

"I'm not!" he repeated fiercely. "I'm a thorough blackguard if you girls only knew it. If you saw me for what I was, you'd stop treating me like an elderly aunt. I'm a Man. Human. A Being in Trousers. A—oh, hang it! Let's play Hunt the Slipper!"

The Lay Figure sighed wearily; he knew there would be no getting rid of them till at least midnight.

The next day was the Academy performance of *As You Like It*.

. . . "Now then, are you ready?" asked the Sergeant impatiently; he stood with his hand upon the curtain-cord, till Jerry, after a last wild clutch at his glued-on beard, nodded assent.

Swish-sh-sh! . . . the clamour of voices in front died down, as with the rustling sound the folds of green baize divided evenly down the centre and ran up to the sides. Praised be the Fates, they did not stick half-way this time!

"Now, my co-mates and brothers in exile," spouted the Banished Duke.

And Nan, standing in the wings, "with gallant curtle-axe upon her thigh", heard him stop suddenly with a catch in his throat! What had happened?—she could see nothing from her cramped, dark corner save a long green-clad leg belonging to a recumbent Forrester; that, too, was beginning to wriggle in an agitated manner. . . .

"Something's upset Jerry," muttered Orlando from beside her. "Something's upset him! Listen to his voice now!"

"I know," Nan whispered back.

The curtain fell, and the Banished Duke joined them in their corner.

"I say, you two, did you hear me dry up?"

"Yes. What was it?"

"Forrest himself is here: ye mighty Forrest come to Dunsinane! Wants to see what Eggs is going to make out of Touchstone, I suppose. I suddenly caught sight of him, bang opposite, between William and old Douglas. Such a shock!"

There was no time for more; a tree-trunk had been moved from Right Centre to Left Centre in order to represent "another part of the forest of Arden"—and the Sergeant was ringing the little bell that announced the next scene.

. . . An impulse to run away gripped Nan by the throat!—but she was hemmed in—there was no escape save on to the stage itself—and then three whole pages of words to be scrambled through, before the merciful curtain would blot her out again.

Swish-sh-sh! Her heart beat wildly against her ribs. She made a desperate attempt mentally to focus those pages, for not a word did she remember of her part!—in vain! A mist hung in front of them.

"Go on!" whispered Touchstone behind her. . . . Already the breathless pause, which always precedes a first entrance, had elapsed. . . . She saw something in brown leggings move forward between the cardboard trees; she was given to understand that this something was herself!—A raised dais at the end of the hall loomed larger and larger, till the bulky figure seated thereon concentrated all the rest of the audience into one huge pair of glittering eyes. . . .

Then—snap!—and the strain gave way. Her feet were her own again, her speeches rattled easily from her tongue; she swaggered about the stage in the true Rosalind fashion. This was her chance, her chance!—and something told her she was doing well.

. . . "As many as have good beards, or good faces, or sweet breaths, will, for my kind offer, when I make curtsey, bid me farewell!"

She concluded the Epilogue with a deep reverence, and stepped back. The slow, sweet feeling of triumph which had been growing and growing in her breast during all the jesting masquerade with Orlando, now demanded a climax of enthusiastic applause from the tightly-packed spectators.

They started clapping, in a polite, ordinary fashion! Ah, now it waxed louder—louder yet—the students in front were calling a name——

Rosalind?

No. Touchstone!

Nan moved aside and gave place to Eggs, pettishly rejecting his desire to lead her on that she might share his reception. Then Forrest himself appeared amidst the actors, majestically congratulated Eggs on his rendering, and threw a swift word of approval to Orlando.

"I *have* done well!" muttered Nan, fiercely clenching her fists.

The Sergeant began noisily to remove the scenery, and the various performers scuttled away to disrobe. It was late; close on seven o'clock.

The Final School Ladies' dressing-room, dimly lit by one flickering gas-jet, was untidier even than usual. Nine girls had, two hours before, donned their costumes, with feverish thrills of anticipation; it mattered little then that hats should be gaily trodden upon, stockings and grease-paints muddled up in the same lockers; but now, in the dreary atmosphere of flatness which invariably treads on the heels of excitement, it was different.

"You've got my lip-salve in your box!"

"I haven't!"

"There it is—in front of your nose. Chuck it over at once."

"That's my own."

"'Tisn't! I lent it to you just before you went on."

"Take it then, if you think I'm lying."

"I don't think you're lying——"

"You as good as said so."

They were tired out and irritable; the jangling continued.

"What's it all for, anyway?" thought Nan wearily. The blue marks round her eyes were stubborn and

refused to come off, even with cold-cream; she gave it up at last. A cold, numb feeling was settling down on her: nobody had mentioned her Rosalind as yet, and she ached for a word of approval that would set at rest an awful premonition.

Was she a failure as an actress, after all?

And if so, what remained? What lay ahead?

She could bear it no longer. Abruptly interrupting a heated discussion that was in progress, she put her question.

"You?—let me see . . . Oh yes, you were all right, I think. But I've seen you in parts that suited you better."

Nan pinned on her tam-o'-shanter, laced her boots, and with a nod to her companions, dragged herself down the stone stairs leading to the entrance hall.

At home, her mother would demand a long account of the performance, together with a detailed repetition of what "they said about you."

It was no good looking forward to anything.

The Sergeant caught her up just as she was opening the big doors.

"A letter for you, Miss 'Artmann. I don't think you saw it on the table."

"Whose writing can that be?" wondered Nan, carelessly slitting open the envelope. There were only a few lines on the paper inside; they ran as follows:

Please, my name is Tony. Tony doesn't begin with an S or with a U. It begins with a T. I thought I would like you to know, before we meet on Saturday.

Nan slipped the note in her pocket. A little smile twitched the corners of her mouth. She felt better; not much better, but still——

CHAPTER VII

WINGED DRAGONS

"But, Nan, are you quite sure—we don't know these people——"

"It's all right, mother!"—impatiently. "He looks just the right kind of boy, and his sister and her husband will be there; a large party of us."

"But going alone with a man——"

"Only Johnny! Johnny June! I thought you liked him."

"Mr. June is certainly a very nice gentleman," acquiesced Mrs. Hartmann, only half satisfied, "but——"

"Oh, do stop butting, mother! It's like a goat."

"Why is it like a goat?"

"Never mind—I don't know," with a hasty fear of imperilling her cause; then coaxingly: "Please, mummy darling! I do so want to see an aeroplane, and this is such a splendid chance."

Mrs. Hartmann gave in. She had never really been strict with Nan; it was merely the environment in which the latter had, as a matter of course, been brought up, that had so hemmed her in. Now, in a different Rome, she was allowed to do as the Romans did, albeit her guardians were at first somewhat startled at the freaks and vagaries of these particular Latins. Mrs. Hartmann had the vaguest notion of how Nan actually spent the hours between nine and seven: "studying at the Academy of Histrionic Art" sounded both leisurely and dignified; why ask for details which might bring to light anything less satisfactory?

So, for the time being, all was harmony at the little Knightsbridge flat rented by the Hartmanns; and

Nan departed on Saturday in Johnny's car with no greater burden than two unnecessary wraps.

"It's a three hours' run," quoth Johnny, when they had left the traffic of the town behind them, and were whizzing past monotonous rows of red-brick "Laurels" and "Covellys" and "Waterloo Villas". "Ten o'clock now—we ought to be there by one. They won't fly till this afternoon, anyhow; the wind is too high."

And by dint of some scorching, they pulled up outside the Aerodrome at exactly ten minutes to one, sacrificing to their extra speed nothing worse than a chicken, "which," as Johnny remarked, "ought to have known better than to cross the road, after all that has been said on the subject!"

Eastchurch, on the Isle of Sheppey, consisted mainly of bare, rolling Downs, clothed in coarse grasses that waved hither and thither at the mood of the winds which swept them. A group of rough wooden sheds were huddled, as if for warmth, in the centre of this cold bleakness.

Tall white posts outlining a vast irregular oval space showed where the race for the Gordon-Bennett Cup was to be held. For the present, however, nothing more unusual than a gull flapped its wings against the heavy sky. The sea gleamed sullenly in the far distance. Nan gazed around her, expectant of she knew not what, and felt disappointed.

"That's Tony's mansion!" Johnny pointed out an erection that differed little from the others, and at the same moment a figure emerged from the low doorway, glanced to the right and left, then, catching sight of the car, ran eagerly towards them.

"You have come," he said simply. "I'm so glad!" His eyes met Nan's and gripped them; both caught a glimpse of something vast and shimmering—un-

explored realms, guarded by the golden gates that are too narrow to admit one alone, but sometimes wide enough to permit two to slip through.

"Sadie here yet?" asked Johnny wearily. He had observed the look, and sighed at the long vista of confidences which lay in store for his sympathetic ear!

"What?" Tony started. "Oh yes, Sadie!—she's here! No, at least—she isn't!—not yet; coming by the next train: the one-fifteen. In fact"—as a brilliant notion occurred to him—"you might run your car over to the station and meet them, old chap! I'll show the Girl round in the meanwhile, and tell her the difference between a Farman and a Nieuport. Will you?"

Johnny obediently started the engine.

"I'm qualifying for a martyr's crown, anyway!" said he. "We meet in your reception-room in twenty minutes' time, Tony—and don't forget it, or Andrew of the Heavy Hoof shall be sent in search of you!"

"Mercy!" laughed the boy as with a loud toot the car drove off.

"Who is he?" asked Nan. She was feverishly avoiding a pause; pushing away with all her might what she knew—and hoped—was inevitable.

"Andrew of the Heavy Hoof?" repeated Tony, piloting her towards the largest of the wooden buildings; "that's my sister's husband; an awfully good sort, really—but wherever it's possible to put his foot in it, wallop! He goes, up to the knee—and leaves it there. Do you know the chee-ild in melodrama who pipes: 'Where's my mummy, daddy?' just after the mother has done a bunk with the other man? Well, that was Andrew in his infancy, and he's grown up just the same."

"And is your sister like that?"

"Good Lord, no! Sadie is quite different; she's one of us."

"Then why did she marry him?"

"She just did, you know. Girls do sometimes. Can we come in, Hicks?"

The aeronaut willingly showed them round his domain; it was typical of all others that they were to see: some smaller, some larger, according to the size of the winged monster caged within.

Four wooden walls and a rough wooden floor guarded the graceful monoplanes and bulkier biplanes, some still unfinished and surrounded by the rumble of machinery and litter of tools. Two tiny box-like apartments at the back of each shed showed where the owners cooked and slept.

Technical terms and explanations rattled like hailstones on Nan's bewildered ears, as the boy conducted her through the Kingdom of the Air. Her senses were busily drinking in the suggestion of intense, almost savage, modernity around her: the men who fought sometimes a winning, sometimes a losing, game against the elements, and whose faces were stamped with the struggle, their voices taut with it. The prevailing atmosphere resembled that of the Academy, in being a community straining with every nerve and muscle towards the same point, and admitting of no counteracting influences from the outside world; but here the workers whose lives were exacted as toll for the ultimate triumph, could not rise again and take their call before the curtain.

Something of this lurked beneath the careless jokes and friendly rivalries that were exchanged. "Merriman won't be with us much longer! He's got the grey look," Nan overheard one young fellow remark casually to another, and her nerves vibrated to the thrill of the words.

Finally they came round again to "my little bit of the earth," as Tony called it.

"Not that it's really mine; the machine belongs to a chap called Bellew, but I do the engineering work for him. Bother, here they are already!" for the hum of voices rose to meet them as they swung open the wooden door.

"Is this your idea of twenty minutes, you nasty little boy?"—and, "I wanted to go and look for you, but Johnny said that it wouldn't be playing the game!" said a pleasant, nondescript little man, whom Nan instantly divined must be Andrew of the Heavy Hoof.

Tony's sister held out her hand with an irresistible smile. Sadie Morrice possessed one of those faces which can only be described in French terms, and which was therefore obviously not meant to reside in the staid and demure England which had given her birth; to say that her hair was pale-gold and her eyes a dancing green-flecked hazel conveyed nothing; she was "*piquante*", "*espiégle*", "*mutine*", finally "*elle avait du chien*"!

Nan felt drawn to her on the spot.

"I'm very glad to meet you," said Sadie, "but more especially because at the present moment you spell lunch. Tony, do escort us to the marquee. We passed outside, and caught whiffs of weary mayonnaise and cheese that was leaping with the joy of life, but we none of us dared enter without the protection of that yellow 'Official' badge which you are dying for somebody to notice on your arm!"

Tony bore the chaff good-humouredly, and did as he was requested, explaining on the way the conditions of the race.

"This isn't Ascot, you know; the aeroplanes don't all start off together and jostle each other at the goal.

Each machine must go twenty times round the course, starting and leaving off when they please; and they are timed. Whichever does it in the shortest period wins the Cup!"

"Has England a chance?" inquired Johnny.

"I'm afraid not; not against France. None of them have been up yet, but I think the wind is dropping now."

Tony carefully banished every spark of enthusiasm from his tones; he might have been talking of cab-horses. In reality, his young soul was rampant with the greatness of the occasion, and only sorry that his own Bristol biplane was not sufficiently advanced to permit him to compete.

In the luncheon-tent, the party drank champagne to the success of Great Britain; and were introduced to Dick Bellew, a rosy-cheeked lad of twenty, who, having an excellent digestion and more money than was good for his morals, was doing his best to acquire what he had heard discussed as an "artistic temperament", as being the most fashionable disease then prevalent.

Various aviation celebrities were pointed out; Blériot and Grahame-White, eating curried prawns side by side, became objects of universal admiration.

"We'll make our own tea in the shed," suggested Bellew. "Tony can run down to the village and bring back some bread-and-butter while—— There's Hamel, there—in the brown suit! He flies for England!"

. . . Suddenly, above the babel of English and French, the clatter of knives and forks, and clink of glass, an insistent whirr made itself heard—first faintly, like the buzz of an insect—then drawing nearer and nearer—at last, wonder of wonders, passing directly *over* the canvas roof of the tent, casting a gigantic black shadow.

The New Sound, marking a New Era.

The visitors without exception sprang from the tables and rushed towards the two exits, stumbling over ropes and waiters as they did so. The aviators, calmly continuing to munch, watched the commotion with a tolerant, pitying smile.

Tony, after the first gasp, was able to muster control over his party:

"Sit down—do sit down! It's *only* an aeroplane; you'll see thousands later on!"—and with fiercely-beating hearts they complied.

"Have you noticed," Sadie remarked, "that we are breathing in a special quality of conceit known as Aviation Swank? It's different to any other kind; these men swank because they are small gods, and hold their lives in their hands, and don't care, and rejoice in not caring! There's something rather fine about it, don't you think?"

Nan was glad when Tony proposed a move; the lure of the New Sound was drawing her potently. When they all emerged into the open once more, two great black bats and one shining dragon-fly were circling with ever-increasing speed round the oval course.

All the afternoon the air hummed with the throb of propellors and the beating of wings, till Nan, gazing upwards with aching neck and whirling brain, found it impossible to conceive of any existence in which the sky had not been dotted with these fantastic shapes. It seemed incredible that she should actually with her own eyes be watching what would in time lead to——

"What about tea?" asked Bellew.

"If Johnny lends us his car," suggested Tony, "Girl and I can run down to the village and bring back what you want."

"I'll come too." quoth Andrew cheerily. "Why are you glaring at me, Sadie? Oh, I see! All right! No, I won't drive after all, thanks; it's too cold."

The sun had rent its veils at noon, and a soft blue afternoon was the result, warm and caressing, such as occasionally visits us in the late autumn. It did not take more than fifteen minutes to reach the ugly little town, and buy up sufficient tea, sugar, milk, cakes and fruit for—roughly—two dozen healthy appetites. Tony and Nan were both sublimely ignorant of quantity, and thought it best to err on the generous side.

Coming back, Tony chose another and less direct route, and after wobbling about over the Downs on an uneven cart-track for a quarter of a mile, pulled the car up with a jerk, and assisted Nan to descend.

"Has anything burst?" she inquired anxiously.

"Not that I know of."

"Then why——"

"We're going to stop!"

"Where?"

"Just over here!" He pointed out a sandy hollow a few yards off. "It will be perfect for an hour or two, and we can see the course."

"But tea?"

"Plenty there for us!"

"I don't doubt it!" laughed Nan. "I'm thinking of the others."

"I'm not!" retorted Tony; "I'm thinking of myself —and you! Girl, please! just because I'm I, and this is the most wonderful day that ever was."

"Is it?" the inevitable coquette flashed out in Nan. "Why?"

"Shall I tell you? Time has had an accident and let a notch slip in his wheel, so that we have swung right back to when the world was young. Come on, Girl!"

He held out his hand. She grasped it. They ran over the short, slippery grass, slid down the sloping, uneven bank which guarded the dip on three sides, and entered their kingdom. . . .

CHAPTER VIII

THE TRANSFORMATION SCENE

. . . THE Principal Girl sits in a ray of pink limelight, dangling a sunbonnet by the strings, and admiring the buckles on her shoes; and the Principal Boy, stepping gallantly forward with plumed hat in hand, remarks: "My, but you are a pretty lass! Shall we get married and dwell together in far Fashoda?"

Then they sing a song about it, and——

No, it was not quite like that!

Well then, let us try again; there are so many ways of playing the same scene. . . .

. . . . .

The Principal Girl lies with chin propped up on her hands, gazing straight before her; and the Principal Boy, squatting at her side like a trapped Faun who rejoices in his bondage, assists her to put the world in order.

And while they discuss Socialism and Theosophy, banish Religion with a sweep of the hand, defy Convention, and topple Mammon over a precipice, whilst they set up and pull down Utopias, whilst all this flows eagerly from off their tongues—two insistent voices are silently shouting: You! You! You! !—till the very cricket at their feet chirps the refrain, and the brown earth takes it up and murmurs it to the growing

grasses, who in their turn tell it to the passing winds, and they weave it into the colours of the sunset:

You! You!! YOU!!!

Then at last meditatively:

"I believe I'm going to like you, Girl! You have the eyes of a Sphinx and the mouth of a Piccaninny!"

"And I think I'm going to like you, Boy! You wear shabby boots, and your lips turn up at the corners!"

"I shall write you down on my Christmas list with the things I want most, between Adventures, and Cucumber-eaten-in-an-Orchard!"

Nan laughs: "Other people would think us mad!"

"That's the joy of it! Do you think that the others know they are the Others, and we are We, or do they think that they are We and we are the Others?"

She thinks this over carefully: "They imagine that they are We, I should say, but of course they're not! We are!"

Tony rolls over with gurgles of laughter.

"Oh, you delicious little—fool! I've been looking for you since years, hundreds of years! It's the loneliest thing that ever happened to be the only fool on earth!"

"Yes." Nan understands again. "It means sending a sob after every laugh for the joke that nobody can share with you."

He touches her hand—very gently.

"One small Girl-all-alone and one small Boy-all-alone, two All-alones added together make no All-alones at all."

"Let's put it down!" suggests Nan, and they write the sum with their fingers in the sand, and add up, and cancel over the line, and turn it into decimals—and find the answer correct.

. . . . .

Meantime the painters and carpenters and scene-shifters are busy on the Western horizon, piling rose and

daffodil clouds against a pale opal frieze, and hurling one jagged black mass right across the burning ball of the sun, to produce an effect in contrasts.

Swooping swiftly from the ground, curving, wheeling, dipping, rushing fiercely into the very heart of the flaming background, weird, unreal shapes are visible; now dark and clear-cut, now blazing with sudden light, as a turn of their wings catches the red reflection of the sky. Dragons, perhaps? Fantastic visitants from Mars? Anything is possible in a Transformation Scene, and the Stage-Manager flatters himself that he has hit upon something really original this time: "Flower-ballets and Lands of Dresden China have been done to death!"

. . . . .

"Isn't it wonderful!" murmurs the Girl under her breath.

A dim purple haze is already hovering over the vast sloping Downs, and draping itself like a mantle round the little scooped-out hollow wherein the couple recline. Boy raises himself on one elbow, pointing behind him towards a timid white slip of a moon.

"There's my lady-love! I remember when I was three months old——"

"You—what?"

"I remember when I was three months old," repeats the Boy unblushingly, "lying one night in bed, and gazing at what looked like an unripe banana fallen into the middle of Heaven. We were very poor at the time, and, though I was often awake when I shouldn't be, I never saw anything more wonderful than a dingy cracked blind or a bit of dirty lace curtain—so this shimmering miracle absolutely fascinated me; it whirled me right away to a marvellous country—just outside the window—where everything was shiny and soft and without corners, where nobody called me a nuisance,

where pretty ladies, like the postcard ones in the shops, were ready to play with me all day long. And still I stared . . . and stared. . . .

"Then Sadie, aged six, came tiptoeing into the room, and: 'My goodness', I heard her say, 'if the new moon isn't peeping right through that tear in the blind on to his face!' and she quickly hung a duster over the hole: 'There, that's better!'

"But it was too late! The moon and I had looked each other in the face for twenty minutes, and during that time she kissed me and marked me for her own!"

This is the moment when Nan might have chimed in with reminiscences of her own babyhood, and the curse laid upon her by the Thirteenth Fairy, but, having no very clear recollection of the circumstances, and the Prompter being just then absent from his box, she contents herself by summoning up that far-away look which is always so near at hand, with the result that the Boy instantly surmises she must be hungry.

One by one the tea-things are dragged from the car, and spread out for the delectation of two people, seven ants, and an earwig.

Mountains of bread! Acres of butter! Stacks of cakes! Hundreds of biscuits! Piles of fruit!

Do remorseful thoughts of Andrew, Dick and Sadie, come to disturb the truants? Visions of three hungry haggard faces waiting and waiting for the tea that never arrives?

Nay, a slight sense of guilt rather enhances the enchantment of this original feast, eaten in the rapidly-falling dusk, with nothing in sight to denote the presence of humanity, save, in the distance, a solitary aeroplane fluttering moth-like against the last pale aureole of day.

It is a curious fact that nothing is so conducive to solemn and sentimental confidences as the mutual

consumption of food in the half-light. Tony, gloomily munching chocolate biscuits, waxes sadder, and sadder yet. He informs Nan that he has not been a good man—he thinks it but right that she should know; the title of Galahad would fit him ill; he likes the alluring flutter of a petticoat! There have even been some cases . . .

He bows his head over the pineapple in anticipation of reproach.

Nan, not to be outdone, confesses that she, too, is fond of the opposite sex, fond of flirting and—and—all that! Tony sternly demands details, and she relates the episodes of Donald, of Thorwald, of Kenrick Marsden; her cheeks burn as she falters out a description of her exact feelings towards the last-named—and Tony nods his head sagely, and tells her that her love was no love at all—merely passion.

A pause. Then:

"You don't mind if I say things right out? You're not a prude?—but no, you can't be!"

"Of course not," cries Nan indignantly.

"It's so difficult." Tony hesitates, digging his fingers into the loose sand. "I mean—well, I'm a man, and have knocked about a good bit"—(Tony is just twenty-four years of age!) "But girls—even nowadays—and sometimes you speak as if you had the whole knowledge of the world behind you . . . and then at other times it's as if you had been living all your life in a convent. I've never run up against anything like it before, and to tell you the truth—I'm not sure how much you actually do know—or how little?"

Nan is not sure either, but says quickly and proudly: "It's all right, I know—everything!"

Tony looks vastly relieved, and proceeds to throw open the doors of his fearsome past. There was a little girl of sixteen, the sister of one of his school-pals . . .

then a pretty governess . . . and a dainty, mischievous Frenchwoman—oh, married, of course! Here Tony adds one or two details which rather astonish Nan, in spite of her vaunted acquaintance with good and evil!—but her face is in deep shadow, so he notices nothing.

"Finally, there is—was—Another Woman." . . . Tony falters, and comes to a full stop; evidently a queen who has been only two days deposed cannot be mentioned as casually as a queen of eighteen months back. . . . "That's a long story! I'll tell you another time," and the silence settles thicker about them.

Tony, fearful of having offended, stretches out a tentative hand. Nan clasps it, with a swift vision of herself as a pure, forgiving angel—then, remembering that her hair is black, abandons the notion with a little sigh. . . .

They sit thus for some time.

A church clock, miles away, chimes seven. Still in silence, they gather up the tea-things, climb into the car, and slowly, regretfully, move away.

It is quite dark by now.

. . . . .

"Hullo!" ejaculated the Assistant Stage-Manager, who with the help of the Call-boy, was clearing up the scene. "They've dropped something!" He stooped to pick up a small glittering object at his feet.

"What is it?" demanded the Call-boy.

"Their sense of humour!"

"Shall I run after them and give it back?" but——

"No," answered the Assistant Stage-Manager, "they won't be wanting it just yet!"

CHAPTER IX

"MARQUISE"

"I'm different to other chaps," said Dick Bellew.

Sadie smiled sweetly. "I know, oh, I know!"

"That's where you're so wonderful!" He twisted himself round on the footstool so as to gaze adoringly in her face. "You know everything—before one even says it. Nobody has understood me in quite that way before. I'm not easy to understand!"

Sadie wondered wearily when he was going.

Since he was introduced to her at the Aviation Meeting six weeks before, he had literally constituted himself her shadow.

"He appears every morning before breakfast," she plaintively complained to Tony, "and insists on making love to me while Andrew is shaving upstairs; just as if any self-respecting woman could respond before she had arranged her face for the day! And he comes at twilight, too, and sits at my feet and tells me all about himself. And he says so often that beneath a sickly mask of mirth I hide an aching heart, that I shall believe it soon—really I shall!—and I'd hate to! He's a Bobby-boy! I'm too old for Bobby-boys! And their hair is always so curly! Please, Tony, take him away and lose him."

But Tony would only laugh, and stroll away to write to Nan; and Dick still haunted the house at Streatham Hill.

He now leaned forward, the better to decide whether her eyes were green or gold.

"I'm not an empty-headed chap," he continued; "I've read Omar—right through! It's awfully jolly."

Silence.

"Do you read Omar?"

"No," lied Sadie; "Omar isn't worn at present!"

Dick looked puzzled. "Not worn?—but he's a poet—didn't you know?"

Sadie rose to her feet. "Dick dear, I hate sending you away, but I promised to 'phone Andrew at four—and I might have to meet him for tea, so——"

"Yes! Yes! I understand!" Dick's tone conveyed volumes in the way of: "You-know-I'm-always-there-when-you-want-a-strong-man!" "Good-bye, then, till tomorrow, anyway!" Sadie groaned in spirit! "And—be brave, won't you?"

. . . He was gone.

Sadie experienced a wild desire to two-step with a chair, go to the Zoological Gardens, say her prayers—do anything unexpected expressive of her relief at the departure.

She controlled herself, however, and merely ran upstairs to her pink-and-lavender bedroom to powder her nose; Sadie would not dream of 'phoning even her husband without first powdering her nose.

. . . "Hullo! . . . Hullo! . . . Is that you, Andrew?—what a time you've been; were you flirting with the typist? . . . *Weren't* you?" (disappointedly) —"Why ever not? . . . Andrew, I'm bored, and there's a ballad-singer outside the drive singing, 'Because God called you Mine'—flat! . . . No, of course you can't help it! . . . No, I won't give her a penny—you said business was bad. . . . Look here, Andrew, I'm going to put on my best hat, and walk down Regent Street, and I want you to leave the City . . . now, at once . . . and follow me as far as Piccadilly, and mash me, and take me out to supper somewhere, and ask if you may kiss me, and perhaps suggest a week-end at the 'Métropole' in Brighton. . . . What's

that? . . . Yes, I know we're already married. . . . There *is* no sense in it—that's just the point! Oh, well, never mind!—No, don't bother about it. . . . Of course I'm not offended! . . . You'll be home at a quarter-past seven?—very well. . . . Good-bye."

Very gently she replaced the receiver on the hook. Sadie was always most gentle when her whole being surged in wild rebellion—as it did now. Why, oh why, did Andrew always fail her when she gave him a chance?

Her eyes sparkled curiously green beneath the shadow of her big black velvet hat. She pulled on a long, close-fitting coat of the same material, slowly and deliberately closed the front door behind her, and, hailing a taxi, was driven to Oxford Circus. Then, springing out, she walked buoyantly down the flaming arcade of luxury known as Regent Street. A thousand lights flared in the shop-windows, on the sheen of satin and the glitter of diamonds, on the bloom of rare exotic flowers and fruit. A faint grey haze hung in the air, and out of it emerged faces, beautiful, high-bred, happy faces, smiling above their soft new winter furs. It was half-past four in the afternoon, the hour when prosperity is abroad, and the night-prowlers have not yet emerged from their lairs.

Sadie swung along in a mood of buoyant exhilaration; there was no special plan in her mind, for experience had taught her that when you sally forth to seek the devil, it is ten to one that he is at the same time out and seeking you!

. . . "You walk so fast," said a plaintive voice at her side, "that I really can't keep up with you!"

Another time Sadie would have flamed indignantly round on the speaker and annihilated him with a look—but now, alas! a taunting little smile curved her lips

which might have been taken for encouragement. She half-turned her head:

"Vicomte!"

"Marquise!"

"Did you know that it was I whom you were following?"

"Of course!"—telling the lie with serene conviction.

"How long have you been in England?"

"About a fortnight."

"And not yet paid me a visit?"

"I offered up a candle to the little god Chance!" replied Alister Bertrand de Vaux Wymondham.

He was one of those unfortunates who, before birth, mislay their allotted tickets, and travel to earth a century too early or too late. Beneath the heavy lids of his light eyes lay ever a wistful consciousness of being somehow a misfit.

"I think perhaps Versailles in its happy, tragically happy later days, might have been the correct setting for my weary wayward personality," Wymondham would casually murmur to startled acquaintances, and they, unable to differentiate between these delicate gems of egoism and the coarse obviousness of conceit, would thenceforth label him as "that eccentric Alister Wymondham! Mad, poor fellow—quite mad!" which was precisely the compliment Vicomte had hoped for.

Meanwhile, standing outside Fuller's rose-draped windows he held Sadie's hands between his own, and made courteous inquiries respecting her husband's health.

"Though you need not tell me," he hazarded, "Andrew is very well, though last week he had a touch of throat, brought on by the damp weather!"

"We are blocking the way," said Sadie, smiling at the correctness of his guess.

"Were you shopping?"

"No. I was just running away from myself."

"You won't succeed in Regent Street," replied Vicomte thoughtfully. "Where is yourself least likely to find you, I wonder?—Have you ever been to the Monument?"

"Good Lord, no! Where is it?"

"I haven't the faintest idea!" He accosted a benevolent-looking Rabbi, who, an incongruous figure in the fashionable crowd, happened to pass at that moment.

"I beg your pardon, but could you direct me to the Monument?"

"Dear me!" murmured the son of Israel, mildly astonished; then, with the courteous dignity of his race, waved his hand towards a policeman.

With the aid of this dignitary, Sadie and Vicomte presently found themselves on top of an east-bound omnibus, the lights and faces and roar of Regent Street spreading like a pageant at their feet.

"And now," quoth Sadie, "why the Monument?"

"I read about it once," explained her companion, still very tired, "in a book by Dickens, I think! Do you read Dickens? When he describes a dinner, one can almost see the gravy congealing in lumps of fat on the edge of the plate!"

"All this is very interesting!" rejoined Sadie. "But I still fail to see why I am on my way to the Monument!"

"So do I!"—wearily. "Never mind, perhaps we'll find out when we get there."

They sat in silence awhile. The bus left behind the haunts of the pleasure-seeker, and entered into the grim, black regions of real London.

"Have you seen Tony yet?"

"Not yet, no. What is his latest discovery?"

"Love."

"Oh?—dark or fair?"

"Dark. And very young."

"So is Tony."

"Younger than you ever were, or ever will be, Vicomte."

"I lost my youth when I saw the first blood of an aristocrat stain the white lilies of France!" said Vicomte gloomily; and so potent was the spell of his voice that his listener felt the roaring, plunging City roll away from her . . . and in its stead an open place flashed before her eyes, and an instrument that rose and fell with a monotonous swinging movement! . . . a graceful, silhouetted figure in knee-breeches and a white wig tied in a queue. . . .

Then the machine crashed again! . . . Sadie came to herself with a little shiver; Vicomte had a trick of airily recounting his experiences at the court of Louis Seize, as if he had actually lived through them. She had forgotten this disconcerting peculiarity of his—it was over four years now since he had quitted England. She asked him what had, at the time, so suddenly determined him to leave.

"You married!"

"To please you. You remarked once that women with their minds dwelling ever on marriage could not coquette with any grace till released from that care."

Vicomte bowed. "I'm flattered that you should remember my poor words. I take it that you have now perfected yourself in the science of flirtation?"

"Is that why you have returned?"

"Can you doubt it?"

They smiled happily at one another; it was good to hear the clash of steel once more—and recognize a worthy adversary.

"All the same," continued Alister Bertrand de Vaux Wymondham, "you made a mistake. Never marry for love where there is also money; you will be bored to death. But never marry for love where there is no

money. And never marry for money where there is no love. Also never marry without love or money."

"Anything else?"

"Yes," finished Vicomte. "Never marry."

"'Ere you are!" grunted a voice at their elbow. "Ef it's the Monument yer wants!"

Vicomte sprang lightly into the mud, extended the tips of his fingers, and helped his companion to alight, much in the same fashion as a gallant of Petit Trianon might have assisted a Ninon de l'Enclos from her panelled coach.

In silence they gazed up at the dingy black pile in front of them.

. . . "Well!" said Sadie. "Here we are!"

"Yes," said Vicomte. "Here we are!"

Sadie cast helplessly about for something to say.

"Why is there a railing round the top?"

"Because people were always throwing themselves down!" explained her guide promptly; "and the customers of the A.B.C. opposite objected. They said the mess on the pavement spoilt their appetites for poached eggs, and——"

"That will do!" interrupted Sadie sternly, and Vicomte subsided.

"I think," he suggested at last meekly, "that you will see it better if you open your mouth and let your jaw drop. One always does."

"I'll open my mouth when there's something to put in it! Do you know that I've had no tea?"

"You poor little woman! Where shall I take you?"

"We were standing outside Fuller's when we met!" —sadly.

"Then why in the name of goodness——"

"You wanted to go to the Monument!"

"I didn't."

"Well, I didn't. I'm hating it!"

"Then we'll go back."

He hailed a taxi.

"By-the-bye," as they bowled swiftly away, "who put up the Monument, and why, and when?"

"I don't know,"—blankly. "Something to do with the Crimea, I suppose; all monuments are!"

Cosily ensconced at a rose-tiled table in the luxurious tea-shop, with a becoming pink light shedding a soft glow over her complexion, Sadie breathed more freely.

"Tell me some of your adventures abroad," she demanded.

Whereupon Vicomte, after a few seconds' reflection, embarked on a picturesque anecdote of a Russian Baroness whom he had met, and loved (temporarily), at Algiers:

—"She annoyed me one night. We parted in anger. I took the next boat to Marseilles, sending her a note of farewell to say she had ceased to attract me: 'your hair is too dark.' In the train between Marseilles and Paris a terrible thought struck me: she had adored me! Adored me for my wit, my grace, my indifference. On the receipt of my letter she would kill herself. I had not the slightest doubt of it. Mad with remorse, I returned to Algiers, visions haunting me of Olga lying white and still on her bed! Olga, a bleeding victim of my harshness. I drove at furious speed to her villa—I tore up the stairs. Was I a murderer?

"Olga was seated before the mirror, with golden hair—yes, rich golden hair!—lying in heavy masses down her back.

"'Mon Dieu!' I cried, annoyed, 'you are not dead?'

"She smiled placidly over her shoulder: 'Cher ami,' said she, 'my hair dyes easier than I'."

"That is quite a good tale," murmured Sadie appre-

ciatively. "Especially when one considers that not a word of it is true!"

"Not a word!" agreed Vicomte, who always fibbed, whatever the circumstances.

He leaned easily back in his chair and ran his eye over Sadie's dainty little figure. "I'm sorry you are married, Marquise; I fully intended, when I had completed my studies of femininity in all its branches, to let you reap the final benefit of my experiences."

"If I had only known that!"—with a sigh. "But you never told me in so many words that you loved me."

"As soon as I have told a woman I love her, she loses all interest for me. Your sex cannot realize that the apex of passion is a mountain-top with a steep descent on the other side; they think it a level plateau where they can walk for the rest of their lives!"

"I was never good at geography," Sadie confessed, stretching out her hand for a fearsome cake adorned with blobs of pink and yellow cream. "So your epigram is lost on me, save for its general disgraceful tendencies. Have you any sense of should or shouldn't, I wonder?"—regarding him curiously over the rim of her cup.

"Cease to wonder!—I have not. I can't even understand what it is—this curious moral standard which men have built up to spoil their lives. I am totally free in that respect. While I can do it with an air, I would steal from my best friend, ruin my own father, make love to my neighbour's wife—

"As I intend to do!" he added; "as I intend to do, Marquise!"

Sadie returned his glance defiantly; if audacity was to be the weapon, so be it! She could hold her own.

"If I let you make love to me, it's simply that you should make love to no other woman."

"Does that follow?" laughed her opponent.

"Perhaps I am clever enough to engross your attentions!"

"But I am cleverer than you."

"Sure?"

"Quite,"—pleasantly.

"Very well then," wiping the chocolate froth from her lips with a tiny lace rag. "We will leave it at that. I must go now."

"Home? Dinner with your husband?" Wymondham, by a single inflexion in his tones, possessed the faculty of making one ashamed of the most virtuous intentions. The prospect of dinner with her husband—a little round, pink-faced figure hacking laboriously at a joint of hot mutton!—suddenly appeared to Sadie worse than distasteful—well-nigh impossible.

"I'm not going home," she announced carelessly; "I shall have dinner with mother, and 'phone Andrew from there."

"What will you 'phone him—that you spent the afternoon with me?"

"Why not?"

"As you say, why not?" Vicomte tossed a lordly half-sovereign to the waitress, bade her keep the change, and followed Sadie into a taxi.

"Good-bye, Vicomte."

"I'll join you, if permitted. I should like to see Tony."

"You won't find Tony such a perfect audience for your attitudes as he used to be!"—maliciously. "His head is full of Nan."

Vicomte shrugged his shoulders. "Tony always grabs at happiness like a child at a toy balloon; laughs and cries over it all day, and is surprised how soon it bursts! He is a Pierrot by nature—though he tries hard to be a Hamlet!"

"And you? What are you?"

A melancholy flicker darkened the man's eyes: then, "I?" he replied lightly, "I am a Hamlet by nature—but I try hard to be a Pierrot! A Pierrot can always contrive that the other person pays the bill."

CHAPTER X

THE COTTAGE BY THE SEA

"You're wanted at the telephone, please, miss!" Nan hastily sprang from the breakfast-table and rushed away. Uncle and Mrs. Hartmann exchanged a look.

"This matter must be stopped!" said the former.

"There's no harm in it!" pleaded Nan's mother; "the boy seems to be serious."

"My dear," rejoined her brother-in-law grimly, "I was a young man once myself, and nobody could have been more serious than I—every time!"

. . . Nan returned, flushed and sparkling.

"Well, what does he say?"

"Oh, nothing!"

"He takes a long time saying it, then," muttered Uncle Hartmann.

"I'm dining there to-night," Nan volunteered carelessly.

"Dining where?"

"With Boy—and his mother."

"Indeed? You might think it worth while to ask me first."

"I knew you wouldn't mind!" Nan's thoughts were still hovering round her recent telephone conversation. She did not notice the approaching thunderstorm, till her uncle, with the truly masculine idea that a row

was no row unless prefaced by a noise and wound up by a headache, brought his fist down with a crash among the tea-cups.

"But I do mind! I object very strongly. There's been enough of this business; every day since six weeks nothing but telephones, and letters, and dining out, and Tony this, and Tony that, and Tony's sister, and Tony's mother, and Tony's aunt-in-law! What's going to come of it all, that's what I want to know?"

"I suppose one can have friends!" flashed back Nan, outwardly rebellious, inwardly apprehensive. Truth to tell, she had been preparing for a similar outburst ever since her first meeting with Tony.

"Friends!" snorted Mr. Hartmann. "Don't tell me that a young fellow trots a girl about for six weeks in order to be *friends*!"

"I can't tell what things were in your time," quoth Nan impertinently; "they're changed."

'Human nature doesn't change!" Mrs. Hartmann thought that she had been a cipher long enough. "You know, darling, if you are seen about everywhere with a young man to whom you are not even engaged, think how people will talk!"

"People!"—with fine scorn, "who are people?"

"Mrs. Rosenfelt told your Aunt Teresa only yesterday——"

Nan flamed up: "Mrs. Rosenfelt! Aunt Teresa!—much good they are to me except to take away my every little bit of pleasure, and give me nothing in exchange. They don't want me at their balls and parties since we have no money!—I'm cut off from all that!—and now all of a sudden I mayn't associate with the set I belong to——"

"That's beside the point!" thundered Uncle Hartmann; "My niece——"

"Hush, Gustave, the servants!" breathed Mrs. Hartmann.

"My niece is not to be walked out like a housemaid! If he means to marry you——"

Whereat Nan, summoning all her histrionic trainings to aid her, fairly let herself go; her indignation being none the less vehement for having herself secretly wondered as to Tony's ultimate intentions.

"Marry! That's all you think of! As soon as a man looks at me, you hold a pistol to his head: 'Are you going to marry her?—if not, be off!'—And that's why I never have any fun like other girls. It would be all right if we had remained in the old circle—I'd never have known of anything better than these conventional money matches—but now I see that it *is* only in that circle—foreign, Jewish, narrow-minded, *rich!*—that a girl and a man aren't allowed to be friends. I've done with those ideas—and you can't pull me back to them. Tony and I are friends. Marriage doesn't enter our heads!—we are just happy to be together!—you're the only crumpled roseleaf in our path."

Uncle Hartmann pshawed impatiently; he did not like being called a Crumpled Roseleaf; nor, if truth be told, did he at all resemble aught so fragrant and so frail!

"I don't object to anything in reason; but these wild extremes——"

"Things in reason are never worth having!" retorted Nan. "I'm young——"

"I'm quite aware of that!" Uncle Hartmann opened his paper and propped it up against the coffee-pot; "and that is why I insist on still keeping a certain authority over you. As it is, we have given you more freedom than most girls of your class enjoy. The Academy, now—you worried for weeks to be allowed to join, thought of nothing else for a year—extremes

again—and to-day is the last day of the last term, I think! What's the result? Have you got an engagement?"

"No"—reluctantly.

"Then get one."

"In a nice theatre, Nan!" put in her mother. "At the St. James' or the Haymarket!"

Nan smiled in a very superior manner.

"Mother dear, do you imagine that one walks into a London engagement like one walks into a grocer's shop?"

"I suppose you must see the Manager first," conceded Mrs. Hartmann. "But Sir George Alexander, for instance, he looks so kind—and you might recite to him. I read in the paper the other day that he was on the look-out for a leading lady for his new romantic play. Of course, if the salary were high, we could move into a larger flat—this looks so poky if a reporter comes to interview you—with a pot of ferns at your back—though you never come out well in a photograph."

Very carefully did Nan explain to her mother the multitudinous obstacles that must be surmounted in her career before they need bother about the pot of ferns.

"Oh!" Mrs. Hartmann was disappointed. "So you must go to a horrid agent first. Your uncle will go with you."

"Mother!"—in horror; "of course not!"

"But the agent might say, 'Give me a kiss, and I will get you a part'."

"Then I'd kiss him quick!" retorted Nan promptly. "I'll go round to Sinclair or John Platt some time to-morrow, and——"

"Why not to-day?" growled a voice behind the newspaper.

"I can't to-day. Tony is fetching me from the Academy."

And the storm broke out anew.

"Understand—you come home to dinner to-night," bawled Uncle Hartmann finally as Nan, catching up her cap and jacket, tore out of the flat, banging the door behind her. . . .

Oh, the utter relief of banging a door when one is out of temper! The joy of throwing into that one action all the pent-up force of your emotions, of anticipating the thundering crash that must inevitably ensue; the thrill of delicious fear which tugs at your heart, when the whole building vibrates and echoes and shakes as the consequence of your deed! . . . And then to walk away, purged of your wrath—very gentle! very peaceful! very happy!

Not a trace of temper darkened Nan's brow by the time she turned the corner of the street, but she was pervaded by a sense of melancholy, for, as Uncle Hartmann had said, this was for her and many others the last day at the Academy of Histrionic Art.

And this meant that playtime was over, and work—real, grim work in the real, grim world—lay ahead. It meant the parting of comrades, and the breaking up of associations. It meant good-bye to the big, bare rooms, and the dark, firelit kitchen; good-bye to certain time-worn jokes which nobody outside the Little World would appreciate; good-bye Chickabiddy and William and the Sergeant—good-bye——

The students laughed a great deal on these occasions, and were noisier and madder even than usual, to deaden that hateful, nerve-racking, "nothing-will-ever-be-the-same-again" feeling, which chased them up and down the corridors, in and out of the dressing-rooms.

. . . "Will it never be over?" said Mara, meeting Nan on the stairs. "I want to go home and cry!"

"I want to laugh," said Nan. "I don't know why!—just laugh and laugh and laugh!—and I'm so miserable. Oh, the beast, tell him to stop it!" for Jerry, with the tactlessness born of despair, was thumping "For Auld Lang Syne" on the piano.

Towards five o'clock, when the lights had been lit, and there was really no more valid excuse for stopping on, everyone—administrator and staff, present students, and former students who had appeared to give their younger brethren a hearty send-off—assembled in the theatre, and made speeches, and shook hands with one another, recalling past successes, prophesying future ones. Then they sang that somebody or other was a jolly good fellow, and gave three cheers for somebody else. . . .

After which there were more "good-byes" and feeble—very feeble—jokes. . . .

"See you again soon!" A crowd in the hall . . . diminishing.

And no one left in the building save the Sergeant in his office, Chickabiddy weeping in her kitchen, and a few devotees who still hung forlornly about the stairs and passages, as if loth to believe that this could really be the end of it all.

Nan had caught sight of Tony, a dripping figure waiting in the grey street outside, and made a rush for him.

"Take me away, Boy—quick, before I disgrace myself!" gasped she, and, clutching at his hand, pulled him over the road and round the next corner, from where they could no longer see Forrest's Academy of Histrionic Art.

She shivered: "That's over!"

"Feeling blue, are you, Girl?"—sympathetically. "Let's go to the Haven for an hour before we go home!"

The Haven was the top room at a little French cake-shop in Soho. The rougher customers who patronized the place were content with the tea-tables in the shop below, and Nan and Tony rarely found anyone who mounted the stairs to interrupt their privacy. They had chanced on the place whilst wandering about London in utter desperation of discovering a spot where they could be alone together.

The beaming proprietress knew them well by now, smiled on them when they ordered chocolate and cakes, told them Monsieur and Madame were welcome, and would find the fire burning, the gas lit.

Up the dark, steep stairs, and through the narrow door.

But what was this?

Someone had invaded their Haven, another couple had found sanctuary in the tiny room.

"Shall we go away and leave them in possession?" whispered Nan; but Tony was an Englishman, with all an Englishman's dogged resolution to fight for a spot where he had once, so to speak, planted his flag. So he seated himself with Nan at the next table—there were but three—and glowered.

The other pair glowered back.

The woman had the piquant appearance of a French *midinette*, an appearance contradicted by the tragedy lurking in her sombre eyes; the man, with his Greek profile and dirty collar, resembled nothing so much as a smudged edition of the Apollo de Belvedere.

Nan instinctively felt them both quivering with a sense of some excitement deferred of almost unbearable strain.

Finally, vanquished by the steady glare of Tony's blue eyes, they rose, and sulkily took their departure.

"Beastly cheek!" commented the Boy, as the door closed behind them.

"They looked rather interesting," mused Nan. "I wonder, were they married, or going to be, or what?"

"They were going to be 'or what'!"

She laughed, and with a sigh of relief tossed off her wet coat, and held out her hands to the small charcoal stove.

"Oh, it's been such a horrid day! I had a row with uncle—and the Academy breaking up—more rows ahead—and the rain," she flooded out her troubles into Tony's ear.

"Not let you see me any more?—but why?"

The Boy in his free-and-easy, Bohemian existence had never yet come up against the brick wall known as adult authority. The girls of his acquaintance were mostly of the ultra-modern type, who have earned an income and a latchkey, and submit to no control but that of their own hearts and heads.

"It's nonsense, Girl! You're not a baby. You must strike."

"One must have money to strike. I haven't a penny in the world."

"The stage."

"That's another worry: I shall have to trot round to agents and people; I'm dreading it." A wild gust of wind and rain shook the windows. . . . "Let's forget about everything horrid, Boy—just for a little while. Come down next to me on the rug, and take me away—miles away—where we can be by ourselves with no other people to bother us——"

"Shut your eyes then for a moment," whispered the Boy, "and I'll build you a cottage, a cottage by the sea!"

"I want the moors too—great purple stretches of them, smelling of heather and moist brown earth——"

"You shall have moors and woods and sea and whatever else you like!" the Boy promised tenderly. "It shall be in Cornwall, our cottage, ever so far from everything. I've found a site for it. Look—it is up on that cliff, with the heath spreading behind it as far as the sky, and the sea in front of it as far as the sky, and a little twisty path that leads from the orchard down to the cove of shining silver sand. All round are towering, jagged black rocks."

"I like firm yellow sand better than silver!" interrupted the Girl.

"I don't!" The Boy looked blank for a moment; then: "I have it! The cove shall be yellow in the sunlight, silver by the moon. Then the cottage itself!—grey shingle?"

"No, I know!" Nan waxed excited in her turn. "I've seen them in Shropshire; white, with heavy black beams."

"And a thatched roof!"

"And a jade staircase!"

"Girl!"—heatedly, "this is to be a *real* cottage; we shall live there one day."

"It's a dream cottage too," retorted Nan, "because we're not living there yet."

"But a jade staircase and a thatched roof?"

"Why not? I love jade; it's so cool and green, like the depths of the sea."

The Boy laughed: "As you say, why not? Oh, but it shall be the eighth wonder of the world before we have done with it, and no one shall see it but you and me. Go on, Girl dear; we'll each take a room."

"The bathroom then for me. Pale pink tiles, and a marble bath sunk into the ground, with four steps leading down to it."

Tony was too anxious to come in with his share, to give her time to elaborate.

"I want an Eastern lounge—mosaic floor with tiger-skins on it—a beaten copper lamp—books, hundreds of them——"

"Thousands!"

"Millions! Bound in calf and vellum; tooled and wrought and—what do you call it? What the monks used to do?—illuminated, that's it! No chairs, but a piled-up divan across one corner."

"It's my turn now!"—impatiently. "I want a dairy joining on to the cottage; cool and paved and white, with a fountain dripping in the middle, and firm golden hunks of butter, and clinking pails of milk, and cream—lots of cream! Oh, and cheeses."

"But, Girl, what would you do with a dairy? Make a hobby of it?"

"No. Just play there."

"How often?"

"Once—perhaps! Never mind! Anything that gives an hour's perfect happiness is cheap at the price. And I've always longed to dig my finger into a whole cheese!"

"Have you, Kiddie? All right, I'll make a special note of the dairy. And I fancy you'll have to sleep there, with your head pillowed on the butter, because you haven't provided yourself with a bedroom yet."

"No? Oh, my bedroom shall be quite simple, in the old English style: large and light and airy, with white walls and chintz-covered chairs and muslin curtains; rush matting on the floor, and the windows always wide open, so that the leaves and the sun can spin patterns together on the floor."

"My bedroom——" started Tony, then stopped. "There wouldn't be many rooms to spare in a cottage," he murmured.

A great wave of scarlet swept across Nan's face.

"The chocolate is on the table," said she hastily. "When did Madame bring it in? I didn't notice her!"

"Of course not; you were in Cornwall," laughed the Boy. He jumped up, stretched himself, and held out his hands to Nan.

"Come along, Dream-Girl. Lock up the cottage now, and hide the key under the third flower-pot on the left as you come through the garden gate. We'll slip back there, you and I, whenever we feel inclined."

Nan looked almost dazed as he lifted her gently to her feet: how remote seemed now the troubles of the morning, the nervous excitement of the afternoon! . . . One could journey very far, with four walls and a charcoal stove and the rain outside to help—not to mention a certain fellow-traveller with grey-blue eyes, a pugnacious chin beneath a sweet girlish mouth, and a certain little tuft of hair that *would* stick out at right angles to the back of the head.

She tried now, in passing his chair, to smooth down this tuft, and he leaned back, drawing her lips down to his for the first time. His touch did not inspire her with the same passionate, restless joy as Kenrick Marsden's had done. It was just the Boy! She knew it was bound to happen one day! . . . All was as it should be!

. . . And Nan forgot that one does not kiss a man unless engaged to him; perhaps she had never quite believed it. At all events, she returned his embrace frankly, simply, as one might kiss a dearly-loved child. . . .

A momentary cloud swept over Tony's face; a puzzled look.

CHAPTER XI

VICOMTE

"Go in, Girl; there's no one in the library except mother." Tony flung off his overcoat; and, as if to belie his words, a lazy voice floated through an open door into the hall:

—"remarked to me in the Gardens of Choisy-le-Roi that it was sad to be a younger brother with no chance of the throne; and I, ever cynical, murmured respectfully that quite a number of sorrows remained to be cultivated apart from that of being a king!"

"Hello, Vicomte!"

"Ah, Tony!" Wymondham barely raised his eyes, yet in his greeting there was a warm note that had hitherto been absent.

"When did you come back?"

"The week before last. I met your sister in Regent Street this afternoon, and she brought me along here."

Meantime, Nan was being welcomed by Tony's mother. The Heliotrope Lady was a charming miniature on which to rest eyes surfeited by crude and violent colour-schemes; always dressed in the faintest tints of mauve, with wavy hair forming a silvery frame to her delicate ivory features, she evoked in the mind dim echoes, fragrant and sad as whiff of lavender or tinkle of spinet, of those far-off days when hoops and powder and patch were in vogue, and when there were no women—only ladies.

Here, however, the resemblance ended. The Heliotrope Lady no sooner opened her rosy lips that she startled her listeners by the extreme emancipation of her views, coupled to the extreme slanginess of her speech; if

there was one thing on which she prided herself, it was the faculty to keep abreast with the times, and in sympathy with the younger generation; but to hear her cooing voice demand of Tony what the devil he meant by reading a Conservative paper, was as incongruous as would be the sight of the Dresden couple in the glass cabinet, dancing a Bunny-hug.

"Nan!" called Sadie; "may I introduce to you Monsieur Alister Bertrand de Vaux Wymondham?"

. . . "Who and why is he?" Nan inquired of Tony, meeting him a few moments later outside the bathroom door, whither she had repaired to wash her hands before supper.

"I can't tell you *why* he is!" laughed the Boy; "but as to who?—well, Vicomte used to be my best pal, the only man I ever really cared about."

"What is he like?"

Tony hunted vainly for phrases which would aptly sum up the elusive personality of Alister Bertrand de Vaux Wymondham.

"He's so difficult! Describing him is like—like trying to pick up mercury with your fingers! He's the sort of chap who would make an appointment with you, airily forget to keep it, and when afterwards brought to book, make you feel it ought to be you apologizing for having been kept waiting! Now do you understand?"

"Of course, after such an extraordinary clear psychological exposition."

"I can use longer words than that!" boasted Tony. "I can spell idiosyncrasy, I can!"

"How long is it since you have seen him?"

"Who? Vicomte?—about four years."

"Four years! And your best friend!—and you just say 'Hello'! when you meet again?"

"Bad form to fall on a fellow's neck!" responded

Tony, running before her down the stairs. Nan followed, smiling; the graft of the Eton boy on to the nature of a Pierrot struck her as amusing.

Outside the dining-room door, he paused to flash her a swift look that seemed to draw the two of them apart from the rest of the world into a tiny intimate orbit of their own: a look that always gave Nan the sensation of having for an instant pulled up her chair to a warm, cosy fire!

During supper Vicomte contrived, in his inimitably suave and polished manner, to convey to everybody that what they had to say was not worth the wagging of the tongue; which artifice left the field clear for him who best understood the subtle art of conversing.

"I think of hiring myself out professionally," proposed Wymondham; "on the Cook's Tour system: 'personally conducted conversations'! So few people nowadays can go beyond a discussion of their automobiles; they don't appreciate the rare joy of toying with words; tossing them out as lavishly as from a sackful of rubies; stringing them on a silken thread, watching them glow in the light of enthusiasm. At dinner parties I should be absolutely invaluable!"

"Unless hampered by your besetting weakness," suggested Sadie.

"Which is, Marquise?"

"Modesty, Vicomte!"

—A violent ringing at the front door.

"Blowed if that isn't another visitor!" murmured the Heliotrope Lady, sorrowfully regarding the remains of the fish.

The tread of heavy boots down the passage . . . and—

"Johnny! ! !" fell in various accents of astonishment from the lips of Nan, Sadie, and Tony; for the ventriloquist stood before them in a costume reminiscent

of the Gentleman in Khaki, crowned by a rakish hat, of the variety adopted by small youths engaged in desperado games; the whole outfit completed and set off by a brilliant Bill Sikes neckerchief.

"I'm a Scoutmaster!" announced Johnny, with beaming satisfaction; "and I've come to supper!"

He shook hands all round, and Sadie, for the second time that evening, introduced Alister Bertrand de Vaux Wymondham.

Johnny looked full at Vicomte—and disliked him!

Vicomte looked full at Johnny—and disliked him!

One cannot explain these things.

Boy Scouts now became the central topic of the moment. Johnny was full of his subject; an eight-year-old playing with a box of tin soldiers could not show more naïvely childish enthusiasm than this foot-light favourite displayed over his new hobby. His very speech smacked of wet brown earth; whilst camping, bugle-calls, first aid, signalling and efficiency permeated the table with such a crisp, open-air atmosphere as served effectually to puff away the mellow spell of past ages, previously woven by Vicomte.

The latter felt this acutely, and it sharpened his irritation against the intruder.

"In the whole detachment of your Scouts," he remarked at length, "there is not the grace which was to be found in a single member of the Garde du Corps!"

"Grace?" Johnny stared hard. "Good Lord, I should think not! I'm not training a troupe of ballet-girls!"

The other shrugged his shoulders: "True! I forgot that the sweetest gift the gods saw fit to bestow upon us, is now only to be found behind a green baize curtain."

"Perhaps," suggested Nan flippantly, "perhaps the gods are more interested at present in the extinction of germs than in the correct fall of a lace cravat."

The tinkle of the telephone bell put an end to further flights of imagination.

"That," Sadie volunteered, rising and shaking the crumbs from her napkin, "is Andrew. I can tell by the way the bell is ringing!—You needn't smile, Johnny; I can. Listen to the steady, insistent monotone."

The rest of the company, having finished their meal, also rose and followed her into the library, in time to hear her fibbing to her husband with an ease and perfection that must have caused Vicomte a throb of pride at his successful tutelage.

. . . "Mother sent round at about six o'clock, *begging* me to come to-night. . . . She would not invite you because she had no Grape-nuts in the house . . . so I went, because I wanted to inquire about that new cook who fries whitebait so beautifully—I know you like whitebait. . . . Yes, dear, I'll be home in half an hour. . . . Did they give you your dinner? —No, there's nobody here except Nan Hartmann—oh, and Johnny June! . . . Yes, only Johnny!"

"That's right!" grumbled the last-named as Sadie rang off. "Of course I'm nobody! When I die you can have a stone put over my grave, with the inscription: 'Don't worry! It's only Johnny'!"

"I've thought out a lovely epitaph for Andrew," said Andrew's wife: "'Here lies,' et cetera, and underneath: 'He added two to two, and the result was four'!"

Everybody laughed.

"Better than adding two to two and making the result seventeen or thereabouts!" growled Johnny, who for some reason or other seemed to have shed his usual equanimity. "Why did you tell your husband an untruth?"—sternly.

"Why?—for the delicious thrill of imagining myself steeped in an intrigue. It's so long since I've known

excitement of any sort, and I believe my system requires it."

"Besides," added Vicomte, "the truth is dull, in that it consists of only one statement, whereas a lie can offer nine or ninety-nine or nine-hundred-and-ninety-nine picturesque alternatives. You, Mr. June, would save yourself a vast amount of trouble by placidly disbelieving whatever is said to you!"

"If I did, I'd shoot myself at once!"

"What a charming moral code yours must be!" murmured Vicomte appreciatively.

"Better than no moral code at all, Mr. Wymondham!"

. . . Johnny, Junior, the ventriloquist's doll, had heard Sadie's name very often on his master's lips; he was perhaps the latter's sole confidant, an always ready listener who could be trusted to keep a still tongue in his head. Junior wondered sometimes who was this golden-haired, amber-eyed siren? . . .

So Johnny, Senior, gauging Sadie's affection for the airy newcomer by the fact that she had thought it worth while to lie about him, now followed the only course that presented itself to his truly British mind: he became pugnacious.

"Better than no moral code at all, Mr. Wymondham!"

"Give me a fag, somebody!" demanded the Heliotrope Lady at this juncture.

Vicomte passed her his monogrammed cigarette-case; then, in reply to the last remark levelled at him:

"Possibly I have a code of my own which I would follow as closely as you yours, should occasion arise. A rapier is often as effective as a cudgel!"

"We're not talking of rapiers and cudgels!" snapped Johnny. "I detest that fashion of discussing things as they are by names that they aren't. It makes my head ache!"

"Yes?"—the slight upward inflexion of Wymondham's voice veiled as sure an insult as the other's open antagonism.

Sadie regretfully rose to go. Her never-failing feminine instinct told her that the prevalent electricity emanated mainly from her own fluffy, bewitching head, and she would gladly have stayed to further the effects.

"I always liked Helen of Troy!" mused she, with a pang of sympathy for the beauty who had caused a ten years' war.

The Heliotrope Lady followed her daughter out into the hall, in order to give her a little "hail-fellow-well-met" advice on the dangers of platonic friendship in conjunction with Alister Wymondham. Then, Sadie having departed, she seated herself at the piano in the little room adjoining the study. Scraps of Viennese opera and lilting *chansonette* floated through the closed doors.

"You look tired, Nan!" remarked Johnny.

"I've had a harrowing day," Nan replied. "Breaking up at the Academy, set to the tune of Tosti's 'Good-bye'!"

"What Academy is that?" queried Vicomte, through a cloud of cigarette-smoke.

"Forrest's Academy of Histrionic Art."

"Oh!—I knew a girl who studied there. She had a beautiful mouth." His tones grew dreamily reminiscent, and Tony, at all times what the Germans would call, "ein dankbares Publikum", begged for the story. "You, plus a girl with a beautiful mouth, ought to resolve itself into something interesting."

Nothing loth, Vicomte embarked on his narrative.

"I met her in Italy, not so long ago, either; the summer vacation, I think she said it was. She had the misfortune to love me, and, worse still, to believe me marriageable. I had to disillusion her—oh, not brutally!

. . . I have not studied in vain the pages of Boccaccio and Dumas. I arranged the daintiest of comediettas; a little actress, Veronese by birth, played the jealous wife to perfection—*my* wife, you understand? So Kathleen bade me farewell with sobs of anguish at the cruelty of Fate and Duty thus to part two loving hearts! She now cherishes me as a fragrant memory, instead of a disappointing reality. Would that all *affaires de cœur* could end thus gracefully!"

. . . "Kathleen?" whispered Nan. "Kathleen?"

Vicomte glanced up sharply. "A slip of the tongue. I shouldn't have mentioned the name."

"You—you haven't heard from her since?" . . . Oh, that terrible hour of waiting in the kitchen—and Jerry's step outside the door! . . . "Suppose she should be—dead?"

"Do you think, Mistress Nan"—there was an amused note in the man's voice—sentimental little fool!—"do you think that I could ever have loved anyone clumsy enough to make a tragedy out of an idyll?"

"You behaved like a damned scoundrel!" said Johnny June.

CHAPTER XII

"TOGETHERNESS"

. . . NOTHING happened. Nobody said anything. Nobody moved even—yet with these words something in the room seemed to alter—to drop heavily! . . . To Nan, hours passed before anyone broke silence.

Wymondham spoke lightly, cheerfully:

"This is where I whip out my blade and hurl my glove in your face, I suppose?"

"You can do as you like," returned Johnny stolidly; "we're not in the eighteenth century now."

"True!"—(and Tony's fingers closed tighter round Nan's arm, in anticipation of—what?). "Yet, as I before remarked, Mr. June, I have my own code, and as nearly as possible try to live up to it. Moreover, France is not so very far away."

"Perhaps you would like to challenge me to a duel?" scoffed Johnny.

Vicomte replied neither "Yes" nor "No"—but something in his expression must have changed, for the other went on with sudden earnestness:

"Good Lord, man! I believe that's actually what you do mean!"

His opponent flicked a long cigarette-ash into the fire. "The time and the place are, of course, yours to name."

"Don't be an ass, Wymondham!" struck in Tony, laughing uneasily, "this is real life, not romantic drama; it—it isn't done!"

"Pardon me, but it is, oftener than you think; and I happen to prefer my ancestors' methods of settling a dispute to an illustrated slander case in a half-penny newspaper. Mr. June can use the foils, I presume?"

Johnny perceived to his horror that he was being dragged into what is popularly termed a "scene"! "Look here, I'm not going to be made a fool of," he began.

"You can hardly help yourself, I think,"—softly. "Your Scouts, for instance, would not give much for a leader who was—shall we say, prejudiced?—against fighting!"

Now Johnny's character was usually primitive in its simplicity; he was a merry, irresponsible schoolboy, nothing more nor less, with something of a schoolboy's

blunt methods of expression. Occasionally, however, an Idea coming his way, he would get astride of it, and tear through space like one possessed, not looking to the right or to the left, careless of obstacles, opinions, everything.

At these times Johnny was no schoolboy, he came nearer to being a god.

Some people called it fanaticism, however, and Tony labelled it "damfoolery".

Johnny now became a god, a fanatic, a damfool.

With head held high and voice as ringing as any Lyceum stage-manager could demand, the Scoutmaster of To-day informed the Chevalier of Yesterday that he would be pleased to meet him whenever, wherever and however his adversary desired.

"Saturday, then, on the Boulogne sands, at four-thirty a.m.—does that suit you? If Tony will act as your second, I have a friend who is of the country, knows its laws—and how to evade them; I'll ask him to officiate on my behalf."

"But—but——" Tony stammered, and stopped short. The music in the adjoining room had changed to the *Yeomen of the Guard*, and the lilting, ironical melodies were curiously fitted to the fantastic absurdity of the situation; the Boy felt as if he were indeed participating in an Opera Bouffe; he confided to Nan later on that it would not have astonished him if they had all taken three steps to the left, three to the right, and burst into song!

. . . "But—but——" his protests flickered away into a weak: "You're being ridiculous, Vicomte!"

The servant entered to build up the fire, switching on a blaze of electric light as she went out. Nan started, blinked, and wondered if she had been dreaming the events of the past ten minutes.

"I'd like a few words with you before I go, Tony,"

said Johnny, and Nan found herself left alone with Alister Wymondham.

. . . "I have a song to sing-o!
Sing me your song-o!" . . .

rippled from the fingers of the Heliotrope Lady. Vicomte hummed the words softly to himself, strolled to the window, lit another cigarette, fidgeted—and wondered why the deuce this girl was staring, staring at him, under her straight, delicate black eyebrows.

"You are interested in my looks, Mistress Nan?" he ventured sarcastically, after a protracted pause.

"Not very," rejoined Nan; then: "Kathleen *did* kill herself, you know!"

"Ah!"—the man's back was turned, it was impossible to guess how far the news had affected him. When he spoke again it was with the rather overdone languor and indifference that always characterized his remarks.

"You're sure that it is I who am responsible for this—er—melancholy accident?"

"She had been queer ever since the beginning of the autumn term—restless and hysterical. Once she fainted. She took an overdose of veronal. It was about six weeks ago."

She delivered herself of the bald facts without sparing him. He stood leaning up against the window, regarding her with half-closed eyes—very light eyes—very green eyes—the man who had killed Kathleen! . . . Nothing was too remote to happen on this most extraordinary of all evenings.

Then Tony returned, flushed and excited, to explain that Johnny, after making final arrangements to leave by the Folkestone boat on the following day, had taken his departure.

And, singing, the Heliotrope Lady returned to her guests, unaware to what she had been the unconscious accompanist.

Finally, Nan found herself jingling homeward, under Tony's escort, in an antediluvian vehicle classified as hansom.

The Boy and Girl looked at each other—looked away again quickly. Then the shoulders of each began to heave.

"Girl—it's no good! I—I want to laugh!"

And laugh they did, till the tears streamed down their cheeks.

"It was like a nightmare, when everything happens without rhyme or reason—and seems quite natural. Boy, are they both mad?"

"Each in his own way, yes. And the two ways just clashed. Besides——"

"Besides what?"

Tony did not reply; he was focussing a mental picture: Sadie, tantalising little imp, telephoning to her husband—and two pairs of eyes that watched her. . . .

"I hope to goodness Johnny can fence," he said suddenly. "Vicomte, I suppose, is a master of the gentle art."

"What does a second in a duel have to do?"

"Not the remotest notion! All the duels I've ever watched have been in farce, when comic French policemen tumble over chairs, and——"

"Boy," interrupted Nan, "does one always drive towards the Strand to get to Knightsbridge?"

"I expect the chap doesn't know his way," replied Tony, who had secretly ordered the driver to go by whichever route he pleased, as long as it did not take less than an hour to reach their destination. "Girl, will you write to me whilst I'm away?"

"Of course."

"All that comes into your head? All the dreams and ideas and bits of things?"

Tony's chief charm lay in his almost feminine intuition, his swift vibration to every passing change in a girl's barometer; Nan even found herself at times inventing moods and phases that did not actually exist, for the sheer joy of having them so well understood.

"Boy,"—plaintively. "Boy, I quite forgot—there's a row waiting for me at home, a bad one. Uncle forbade me to come to-night."

He slipped his arms round the slim grey-velvet figure; she cuddled up to him in a wriggling, tired pussy-cat fashion that was all her own.

"And you're going away!"

"Girl," said the Boy, blissfully unconscious of the sympathetic eye at the flap above, "just remember this: nothing counts except you and me, nothing on earth!—it's all outside, and we somehow or other have crept in, have found the centre—and each other! So don't worry, Kiddie Mine!"

. . . Togetherness! . . . The harness-bells jingle its melody, the horse's hoofs strike it out of the ground in little sparks. Togetherness—why, the world is full of it this night; it flares from the walls in red and yellow lights—is echoed in the muffled roar of the crowds sweeping along the pavement. Togetherness!—that man just crossing the road must have known it once—the afterglow is still in his eyes. . . . and there, the very barrel-organ at the corner has woven the wonder of it into music, so that the hearers are fain to dance. . . . Togetherness! The undiscovered El Dorado of dreams—the answer to the Sphinx's riddle—the Philosopher's Stone that turns all it touches into gold. . . . Togetherness!—it is everywhere; radiant under the

streaming gas-lamps; twinkling from the windows where the blinds have not been drawn; throned high up in a hansom that rattles its way swiftly, all to swiftly, along the lit streets—and see, two lovers have just turned into the silent, shadowy park. . . .

Togetherness!

"How I always hate saying 'good-bye' to you at the end of the evening, Girl," said Tony softly. "It seems so incomplete, so——"

"Yes," said Nan; "I wish——"

"So do I!"

CHAPTER XIII

"HE SAID TO HER——"

A GRUBBY hovel near Boulogne,

Friday—11.15 *p.m.*

Just this minute arrived, Girl. Imagine me, tired and dirty, sitting on my portmanteau in the passage of something that calls itself an inn. From where I am, I can catch a glimpse of the femme de chambre *preparing coffins in a cupboard—or, as she puts it, making the beds in our room! Johnny's voice, ordering supper, floats up the stairs: he wants a chop—the innkeeper means him to have veal. Johnny is speaking Anglo-French—the innkeeper Franco-English! I don't know yet which will win.*

How many weeks is it since we parted, Golden Girl? Weeks?—years!—centuries!—œons! Common sense whispers, "Thirteen hours!"—but I don't believe her; what has she got to do with lovers, anyway?

I want you so badly—so badly that I ache! I want you to mother me and tuck me up in bed. No, I don't!

I should hate it. You shall be my little pal then, who tells me all her thoughts and secrets—who walks with me, plays with me——

No, a thousand times no! Why, you are a Princess, whose finger-tips I am just allowed to kiss; in whose service I am graciously permitted to pass my days——

That won't do either! You are too high up on your pedestal! You must step down, warm and human and soft, to my arms——

Johnny is bawling for me from below, and my pencil has worn to a stump; to judge by the smell, it is veal, not chops! Bother, I don't like veal!

Saturday—3 a.m.

. . . Dawn silence! In half an hour I must wake Johnny . . . not a soul is stirring. But I'm too restless to sleep.

Good-morning, Kiddie Mine!

. . . There is a faint streak of grey in the East, and a cold little breeze blows in at the window; the tide must be out, because our room looks towards the sea and I can hardly hear the swish of the waves. At four-thirty we meet Wymondham and his friends. They are going to bring the lanterns and foils. . . .

Have I been dreaming it all, or will there truly be a duel on the sands? I shut my eyes tight and imagine that when I open them again I'll see the sun streaming through the blinds of my own room and mother trying to pull away my blankets.

No! It is still the low ceiling and the black walls; the crucifix over the bed and one candle guttering in a terra-cotta jar; a drowsy hush wraps itself like cotton-wool around the world.

It must be true then.

. . . The sky is lightening and a sea-gull shrieked twice. . . .

Ten minutes before I need wake Johnny!

"He looks so sturdy and tanned and British lying there, that it is hard to connect him with the flourish of three-cornered hats, the play of steel blades—and the thin trickle of blood on a white frilled shirt.

He has not spoken much about it. I was talking of you the whole way to Folkestone, and on board we were both rather silent—it was a choppy crossing.

Only just before tumbling into bed he said to me: "Poor old Junior!—if I get swiped out he'll *never speak again—that's a dead cert!" Johnny, Junior, is the doll he ventriloquates with, you know.*

If you were beside me, Girl, I could whisper so many things—things that can't be said in broad daylight; but this is the hour when nothing is too strange or fantastic to happen, when——

Half-past three! I must wake Johnny. . . . My heart is thumping so loudly in the silence that it ought to do the trick by itself. . . .

If anything should happen to either of them! They are both my friends. . . .

Saturday—2.30 *p.m.*

Damn it! Blast it!! Curse it!!! A whole week—an eternity before we meet again; more, perhaps! I shall grow grey and old and bent——

To explain matters: Vicomte is laid up with a hole in his shoulder, and I, sacrificed on the altar of friendship, am stuck down in this confounded pigsty to soothe his throbbing brow.

And it's all his own silly-ass fault!

But I suppose you want to hear about things from the beginning.

Well, we walked along the sands in the bleak greyness, as far as an old wooden breakwater, which was the appointed trysting-place (good word!). The others, of course, had

not yet turned up—trust Vicomte for that! So we waited; I with my heart sinking into my boots, Johnny with his coat collar turned up and his hands thrust into his pockets, resolutely determined not to talk, not to laugh, not to cry, not to show emotion of any sort whatsoever!

. . . It was chilly. The sea came tumbling in over the sands, and moaned in an unearthly fashion.

Very cheery altogether!

At last two shadows loomed in sight, one bearing a sickly greenish lantern, the other two foils. They saluted us. I ought to have been dignified, but my teeth chattered. Vicomte was groomed and polished as if for a dinner-party; he was more at ease than I have ever seen him before. Perhaps all his yearnings for knee-breeches and Versailles are not merely an effective pose—perhaps he really does belong to that period more than to ours!

His friend, the exact replica of a tailor's block with the wrong clothes on, bustled us through a lot of formalities, then counted three, and the duel began.

Two blotches of white shirt against a torn grey sky with dirty yellow patches in it.

And they could neither of them fence!!!

It was like the mad combat in "Alice Through the Looking-Glass". I could have held my sides with laughing if the other second had not been so grave.

They hacked out at one another in an uncertain, miserable fashion for a little while—feeling their way; then Johnny thrust clumsily and fell forward, and before I could see what had happened Monsieur Larolles ran between them, striking up the blades.

Vicomte was run through the shoulder.

Of course Johnny ought immediately to have exclaimed: "Blood is spilt and honour is satisfied!"—but he didn't! He said instead: "Oh, I say, old chap, what rotten luck! I'm awfully sorry!"

And with that everything, from being topsy-turvy, stood

right way up again, and the Yeoman of the Guard *stopped tinkling in my ears, as it had done since* the *evening! Vicomte was superb, of course; and the upshot of it all is that Johnny tore back to London in time for his matinée, Monsieur Larolles took his leave with many flourishes, and I am doing ministering angel in the only first-floor bedroom of "l'Hirondelle Bleue".*

Write very often, won't you, Girl dear?

Boy.

Tuesday.

Your letter came an hour ago; a patch of sunlight in fog—a scarlet poppy in a dull landscape—a second's dream in a long night—a lilt of music—a stray perfume. Your letter!

I was furious that you should have had that row on the Morning After the Night Before. Girl, it's absurd!—ridiculous! Your uncle must be off his head! What do they mean, these old-fashioned, unreasonable restrictions and laws? The curb placed on your freedom? The crushing of your individuality? It's time you made a stand against it all, now and for always. If you give in, you are lost, swamped for ever in a hideous bog of obsolete convention?

Besides, why shouldn't we be together?

Oh, if I could only get back to you! But Vicomte can't be left yet, he is feverish. By-the-bye, he said such a curious thing while I was dressing his shoulder to-day:

"All this must amuse Kathleen very much, if she is allowed a sense of humour up there."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "She's dead; didn't you know?"

"Yes, or I should not be lying here, expiating my sins!"

I still groped for light, and he flashed me that mocking, whimsical smile of his.

"Dear Tony, do you really imagine that I, whom Louis once nicknamed the 'Devil's Assistant' for having given so many men a swift thrust to Hell—do you really imagine that I cannot use the foils like a gentleman?"

—There is the riddle! Make of it what you will.

I spend my time between his bed and dreary onion patches. There is also an innkeeper's daughter, whom I meet amidst the onions. Yesterday, to vary the monotony, I kissed her hand. To-morrow, perhaps, I will kiss her lips.

Are you jealous?—Please, please be jealous!

She is very beautiful, with black eyes and raven-black hair and cheeks like sun-flashed peaches. Now are you jealous? Oh, very well, then!—she is seven years old!

There are no books to be found except a battered copy of "Three Weeks", left here by Heaven knows what kindly Briton to save me from lunacy.

I have read and re-read it, and picture you as my Tiger Queen.

God! If you were with me!!!

I have only one other craving—for matches! Matches in great quantities, that I might waste them, whole handfuls at a time. I never grasped the extreme value and rarity of matches till I was sent here to do so. There is always one box in the house, containing three wax vestas, two of which won't strike; on the third, therefore depends whether we pass the evening in darkness or light! I once got away to Boulogne for an hour and attempted to buy a boxful, but the price was beyond me! . . .

Oh, fellow witch, who rides with me on the broomstick of imagination across the face of the moon at dead of night —on the wings of my youthful bat do I send you fragments of my soul.

And at morn, when dewy diamonds are yet tangled in the gossamer webs of elfin spiders, at that hour will I watch

for the scarlet-breasted humming-bird who bears your reply.

Which means in English : please write soon !

Boy.

No day, No time, Nowhere.

I'm miserable ! I want to come home ! There's no letter from you ! Oh, oh, oh, I'm going to eat worms ! The sea is a dirty black puddle ; the sky a dirty grey smudge ! What's the good of anything ! No one cares ! I hope you're miserable too !—I hope everybody's miserable !

Boy.

P.S.—Your letter just come. Feel better !

Thursday night or Friday morning.
(Watch stopped, so don't know which.)

Woke up five minutes ago, and it suddenly struck me that I had never actually told you I loved you.

Of course we both knew, but still—I love you ! There, now at any rate I can sleep again ! I could not bear to let another minute slip by without saying it !

I love you !—and nobody in the whole wide world has ever said it before—not just like that !

Boy.

Friday—9.30 *p.m.*

Two letters from you by the same post, dated Wednesday and Thursday ; two new stars in the sky ! I am bubbling and frothing with sheer happiness.

Vicomte, up for the first time, regards me with a pitying smile.

Poor Kiddie ! Doesn't she like rubbing shoulders with facts ? Has she had corners chipped off at a theatrical agency ?

Your note written on the sands at Bournemouth was delicious ; but you mustn't stay there, Girl o' Mine—I

can't allow that for a moment. Let your people go, and take a couple of rooms by yourself in town.

I would look after you! Money? Oh yes, I know! Damn money!

And yet, if we were rolling in it, like your friends the Rosenfelts—how well you describe them!—should we be happy then?—or would the gipsy in us rebel against luxury and niceness and placid content? The part of us that rushes out to the sea and the wind and the stars—the ear that can catch the million whispers of the night and weave them into Romance—the soul that delights in jewelled words, in fantastic figures, in wild Bohemian haunts, and in the pipes of Pan? The moods that transform our modern personalities at will to those of Antony and Cleopatra, drowsing beneath a burning blue sky, or to a Harlequin and Columbine, with no knowledge of Yesterday or To-morrow, with a sob to crown each laugh, and a laugh in the heart of each sob?—

How would all that fare in Number Seven, Park Lane? No, Girl o' Mine, no!

I wonder if my letters hit you on the quick as yours hit me, and call up a great deep smile of understanding? We are so alike, we two! Fitting into each other as two pieces of a puzzle—and yet there is a barrier between us! You have noticed it too, I think! A surge of thought that has to be withheld—a question unanswered—a pent-up torrent of feeling—a hidden door in your mind of which you have not handed me the key! Why? Why?

It is no good taunting me with the Other Man; I have never been jealous in my life! You may flirt as much as you like—and come and tell me all about it afterwards; Othello was a stupid idiot to my mind, and deserved all he got!

Vicomte and I have been playing chess. Now he has gone to bed, well on the road to recovery, I think.

It is getting late; the hands are creeping round the old

clock. Mine host, reeking strongly of garlic, hangs about the room, yawning, anxious to carry away the lamp. . . . Sandman is very, very busy . . . eyes closing—closing. . . . Silence—deeper—deeper! The clouds spin fast—then a great, great black void.

Sleep.

Good-night, Girl.

Tuesday.

Send off that letter at once, Girl! How dare you write to me and then keep it back! It is mine by every right of Cupid and the Magna Charta.

You tantalising little devil!

Wait till I get you to myself in our Cottage by the Sea. I have a fancy to-night to be there in winter, not, as we have always pictured it, in spring or summer, sunshine, green leaves, blue sea and apple blossom!

. . . No, we will arrive there late one night in January —very, very tired! A strange white night with that breathless feeling that hangs in the air after snow. A pale moon will float in a pale sky, with black, gaunt trees silhouetted against it. White, glistening snow shrouds the world except for the dark green shining sea that swings sullenly against the rocks below us. Snow crunches crisply beneath our feet as we draw nearer to our home, guided by a leaping, cosy red light in the window—the reflection of a log-fire.

Why, of course, the Pixies have lit it for us—they knew we were coming.

One day, Girl—one day!

Last night in bed I stretched out a hand in case fancy had become fact. . . .

Boy.

CHAPTER XIV

"SHE SAID TO HIM——"

Friday evening.

You've got to hear all about it, Boy, so it's no good looking bored.

I woke up this morning feeling as if I had been watching a shadow-dance at a marionette-show—as if nothing would ever be real again.

But on top of this came uncle—the stern, old-fashioned guardian as opposed to the modern rebellious ward!

We began before breakfast already—gentle argument at first, until I discovered that we were running round different circles—so no wonder we never met!

Finally he lost his temper and bellowed: "Either you obey me or leave my house for ever!"

"Very well, then!" I hurled back; "I will!!!"—and, rushing to my own room, dragged out my trunk and packed furiously.

Half-way through my labours I found myself wondering what I was doing it for—I knew that I wouldn't really leave the house.

One doesn't.

Whenever I work up to something particularly effective there is a little part in me that just pulls me back, saying:

"Don't be a fool!"

I compromised by not returning to the breakfast-table.

I had only had half a kidney, and was so hungry!

So I consoled myself with visions of Nan Hartmann, white and worn, but looking very, very beautiful (of course) giving parting blessings to a weeping crowd of relations before floating away to a better land!

Can't you hear the charwoman on the subject of my demise?

"Pore thing—so young, too!"

I wish you weren't so far away, Boy!

Monday, 9.30 *p.m.*

Your three letters were handed to me this morning with grim silence and a dish of sausages. I laid the letters aside in favour of the sausages, not wishing to insult you by mingling the two.

Afterwards, I escaped to my own room, tucked the four walls round me like an eiderdown quilt and let you talk to me.

Your account of the duel rivalled Dumas; I'm so glad that Vicomte is hurt, not Johnny!

But, Boy, Boy—a whole week!

I have London-ache badly to-night. Do you know what that is?—a very tired, awed, alone sort of feeling that comes when one has been tramping streets and looking into thousands of unresponsive faces.

And yet I love London. She has one mood which always calls me—her tender, wistful rain-mood, at twilight, when the pavements are wet and glistening, and reflects the lights in the shop windows; when passing features are blurred and softened by the shadow of an umbrella; when there is a grey veil drawn over the chimney-pots and a faint gold stain in the Western sky.

That is how she looked when I returned this afternoon from my first visit to a theatrical agency. I couldn't find the place at first, and when I had found it I pretended to myself that I hadn't, so as to put off going in! I was frightened, and felt a very, very tiny person in a very, very big world!

At last I screwed myself up to it. The way led up some dark, steep stairs, the air thick and cobwebby with lost hopes. A rat-faced little clerk told me that I must wait

if I want to see the agent without an appointment, and he looked at me with a "she's-no-earthly-good" expression which was encouraging, to say the least of it.

I studied the grimy picture postcards on the walls, and read the framed letters from celebrities. Other people were waiting with me—painted cheeks and dead eyes, clothes that might look smart by artificial light, men who were either too old or too young. Most of them seemed to know each other and talked, but there was none of the keen, excited hopefulness of the Academy students!

They were all "in the know", these people, and didn't gabble about Art and Atmosphere—only speculated on the chances of a two-pound part in the Provinces.

I stared at them and wondered if they wondered what I was doing there.

The extraneous introspection of an egoistical mentality! (loud applause).

One by one the rat-faced clerk admitted them into an inner room; one came out flushed and angry, another laughing, but most of them with the same dull expression with which they had gone in.

I felt my turn was approaching, and muttering to the clerk something about "my handkerchief", rushed down the dark stairs and into the Strand as if lions were after me.

Brave girl!

. . . I don't like it, Boy! I don't want to fight, and rub shoulders; it is cold, and I am tired—besides, the Cottage by the Sea is waiting for us; let us pull the curtains and draw up our chairs to the fire! No, I don't want a chair; a rug will do, with your knees to lean against. You may light me a cigarette—cork-tipped; a long, shrill train whistle sounds in the far distance—a great gust of wind blows against the windows. I read you a quaint sobbing little story, and you explain me the plans of the new model car you are building. . . .

Then the fire crumbles down to a dull glow and we drift away into Wonderlands and dive into the smouldering red hollows with Peter Pan and Pierrot and the Pied Piper as companions! . . . We have been silent for several minutes—a coal falls out of the grate and the grandfather clock grunts out ten resty strokes. . . . "Come along, Boy!—Sandman is on his rounds!"

Girl.

Wednesday.

I was just reproaching myself for having scribbled you fifteen pages of rubbish, when your last letter arrived—also fifteen pages—also rubbish—the rubbish so beloved of both of us, and which only very clever people can invent!

But then we are very, very clever!

I am writing just after lunch, in the hope that broad daylight and the aftermath of cabbage will have a sobering effect upon my style.

I spent the whole of yesterday in the old cloistered environment of my early youth, with some people called Rosenfelt. They have got richer as we have got poorer, so they think they ought to be kind to me.

They are! Very kind to me!—Ugh! ! !

There are two daughters—Louisa and Connie, both nice girls—nicely brought up, nicely dressed; they play the piano nicely—speak nicely. The eldest has just married a very wealthy man and now sits behind her own silver tea-equipage (silver, mark you, not plated), and commands the services of five swift-footed Abigails. The final reward of niceness.

Is it worth it? I wonder! Does she never feel sad and mad and bad? Would I rather return to all that than be as I am—muddled—storm-tossed—miserable—gloriously happy; one foot in the old world and one in the new?

And I can't do the splits!

But to return to our muttons—rather appropriate in

this case!—the Rosenfelts received me in a mild atmosphere of well-bred excitement. I was not the cause. No! They were expecting a Man *to tea—the weird, wild monster known as Man—a very rich Man, too, who might possibly prove a* parti *for the second Miss Rosenfelt!*

The second Miss Rosenfelt, in consequence, had her hair newly waved, and wore her Sunday raiment—"neat, but not gaudy". She is vaguely supposed to be my "best friend"—and entertained me by producing an autograph album stamped with her name in silver; and begging me to write in it "a verse of something or other, and your name". I racked my brains, but the only thing I could find in them was one of Swinburne's splendid indecencies—which wasn't suitable at all!

An inspiration struck me at last, and I scribbled: "Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever", etc. Connie thought it awfully nice!—looking through the pages, I discovered that seven other people had had the same inspiration! There must be something in Connie that draws it out!

Presently he *came. I expected a Herculean figure puffing like a sixty horse-power Mercédès—instead of which a funny wee fellow appeared in the doorway, with a thin face, and a perpetual mask of rattling cheeriness hiding what must be, I think, a wistful little soul: The Clown in the Pantomime, whom the Harlequin always bangs with his bladder! In short, I felt instinctively that here was the type of man who, wherever he went, would be the victim of apple-pie beds and other practical jokes as a magnet attracts needles.*

I am treating you to this lengthy description because he made a mistake and took a violent fancy to me instead of to Connie.

And under the baneful eye of Mrs. Rosenfelt I waxed impish and flirted hard.

Are you jealous? Please, please be jealous!

After he left I was speedily reduced to a meek and gentle pulp ; the long-forgotten lessons returned to me : I spoke when I was spoken to ; I had never travelled, never mixed with actors, never been kissed ! And I left the house feeling as if I had been stifled in a Turkish bath.

We are going to Bournemouth to-morrow to find rooms for the winter. The lease of our flat is up next month, and mother is anxious to get away from the fogs.

I am dreading the return to hotel and boarding-house life.

I want——

I wish——

Girl.

Thursday—noon,

(Written on the beach near Bournemouth.)

I have escaped for an hour or two, Boy—escaped on to the beach to drink in deep gasps of briny, seaweedy ozone—I even licked a stone to get the taste of salt on my lips.

It's a blue morning—why do people call their most miserable moods "the blues", I wonder ? To me it means that a blue haze hangs over sky and sea, and the earth is laughing and the water tipped with gold.

The sort of morning that would impel a heroine of fiction to "spring out of bed with a joyous cry and, flinging wide open the windows, drink deep draughts of God's pure air", etc.

Have you ever done it ? I invariably roll out of bed with a drowsy grunt and curse the waiter who sounds the breakfast gong !

How I wish you were here beside me, Boy ! Do you know what I want now more than anything else ? To be by the sea—the real sea (not pier-bound), the sea belonging to our Cottage ; to slip on a pair of knickers and rush with you down to the shore ; to pull off our shoes and

stockings and feel the cold, wet sand squelching up between our toes and the cold, fresh breeze blowing through our hair. We would wander over rocks and pools, and pick up shells and squirming crabs and put them all in a new, shiny, striped tin pail—and then come home to lunch, wet to the skin and plastered with sand and ravenously hungry.

And eat and eat and eat; then lie out in the sun and sleep and sleep and sleep.

Boy, we must *do it all some day. . . .*

It is time to go back—back to Everydaydom!

Good-bye, Dream-boy!

P.S. There is an old boat lying next to me, with Molly *painted on its prow—then partially washed out, and* Lizzie *put in its stead.*

Tragic record of Man's infidelity!

I can imagine Lizzie—*a tall, dark, flaunting coquette, who could leave no one in peace till he succumbed to her wiles——*

And poor little brown-eyed Molly, who had been so proud when the bronzed fisher had sworn his boat should bear her name—what of her?

Sentimental twaddle—time I stopped!

Saturday night.

Why aren't you here to-night? There are twenty thousand devils rioting round my room.

Oh, but it is a dangerous thing to wake the Sleeping Princess in the Woods, for once aroused she cannot close her eyes again!

The wind is moaning horribly—and in the flat below somebody is breaking their heart across the strings of a violin. . . . Why aren't you here? However much the future may bring us, it can never give back these wasted futile evenings of Might-have-been.

Your last letter is by my side—you say: "I love you", but it means nothing! Ink-marks on blank paper.

Why aren't you here to-night?

If I could be a man—go out and enjoy myself!—spin through the lit streets in a whizzing car—enter great buildings—laugh—drink even.

But I am no man—only just beginning to be a woman—and I am looking my best—and no one to see me.

The room is so hot—I have never felt quite like this before.

Boy, I am frightened of myself in this mood—draw me nearer to you—nearer still—for there is only you left in the whole dark world.

But you are not here. Good-night.

(Nan did not send off this letter—the Thirteenth Fairy forbade it.)

Sunday.

I wrote you a wild letter last night, Boy—but did not post it.

Are you sorry?

I think you would have rather liked it! I said——

No, I won't tell you what I said!

Yesterday afternoon Sadie rang me up and offered to take me to the "Empyrium" to see Johnny. We went round to his dressing-room afterwards. He had been the day before at a Review, and was very full of "how I and B.-P. led the Scouts"!

Bless him!

He wouldn't say a word about the duel. I think he is afraid of having made a fool of himself!

All sorts of odd people—acrobats and tragedians—strolled in from time to time to tell Johnny their various troubles; then Andrew appeared to fetch us, and started asking everybody "how they did it". So we bore him rapidly hence!

It is Sunday! The heaviness of roast beef still hangs about me like a halo. I sat the best part of the morning in Kensington Gardens, opposite the statue of Queen

Victoria, and watched the chinless persons who came to gape at it with simple reverence and open mouths: "She wos a good Queen, she wos!"

The gong again! Sunday seems to be all meals! I would so much rather have adventures; just think of it: three adventures a day—at eight o'clock, one o'clock and seven o'clock—and perhaps an extra little adventure thrown in at tea-time. The earth is teeming with them, for those whose eyes were washed with the waters of the Wonderwell before they were born.

When are you coming back? *Girl.*

Monday.

Boy, I don't know what to do with my life. I'm no good for the stage, I see that now. I've seen it ever since I performed in As You Like It *at the Academy. But I hate telling my people; besides, if I don't do that, what* am *I to do? I loved the Bohemian life as long as we merely played at being actors and actresses, but now it's the real thing, or nothing; and oh, Boy, I believe I'm a coward, because at the very thought of all the knocks and bumps that lie ahead in the "real thing", I want to turn tail and run!*

If only I had what is called the "inner consciousness of genius" to carry me through! But I haven't. And yet, I'm sick of lounging about.

The social set of Hampstead and Maida Vale does not attract me—and the lightness of my purse does not attract them.

My old student friends I don't see, because most of them have probably found engagements, and I hate being made to feel left out in the cold.

And you are away!

I want—my letters seem to be full of "I wants"—I want to do things, feel things, see things! I want to be part of the great machine, to pulse with every rotation of its

wheels; I want to be one of the World of Art and Letters; to meet great minds; to understand big, revolutionizing thoughts; to collect around me authors, scientists, painters —young enthusiasts who are still "getting there"—still hot for the fight!

I have been thinking over what you wrote about the locked door between us; yes, you are right, it is there; sometimes we draw close enough to see a gleam of light through the chinks—but leave it locked for the present; one day it will swing open by itself.

The key lies in my girlhood—or your manhood—whichever you like. She is a strange being—the Girl of To-day, she may have read, theorized, and discussed all the secrets of Heaven and Hell, yet at the first touch of real lips, the first approach of real love, she is once more the shy, virginal, wondering piece of innocence that has been satirized under the name "Early Victorian".

Modern Man finds this hard to understand; he thinks because the outer walls are down, he can walk straight into the inmost chamber of all.

Dear, don't think that I am capable of—loving! I wish I were just a straightforward country lass; life becomes so complicated when one is morbid and atheistic and temperamental and introspective; when one belongs to a transition Period of Civilization and the veriest schoolboy knows how to spell psychology.

All these long words have made me sleepy. Rockabye Lady is passing near with her white and crimson poppy-buds; the crimson buds mean dreams! I wonder—shall I dream to-night!

Girl.

Tuesday.

I believe you are never coming back! I believe you never even existed!

Girl.

CHAPTER XV

"THE CONSEQUENCE WAS——"

"BREAKFAST," quoth the Vicomte, pale and interesting in a black satin sling, "is a meal which should invariably be partaken of in bed, were it not for the ensuing discomfort of lying on crumbs! I always say——"

He paused on remarking that Tony, far from paying attention, had suddenly cast down his buttered roll, and was making for the door in a fashion that bespoke some fell purpose.

"You are going out?"

"I'm going to London," explained Tony.

"Now? At once? Just like that?"

"Just like that! I can walk over to Boulogne and take the next boat; you're well enough to be left, I suppose; Madame Pierre will attend to your shoulder every night—her ugliness simplifies matters a lot! Good-bye, old chap—send my toothbrush and things after me, if you happen to think of it; if not, don't! Oh, and lend me a sov.! I should say you'll be able to travel soon. Good-bye."

Wymondham smiled. "O primavera! gioventù dell' anno," he quoted mockingly; then, stretching out his hand for the coffee-pot: "O gioventù! primavera della vita!"

Tony was already at the door; he flung round impatiently.

"You may laugh!" he cried, "but in all your brilliant, cynical, beruffled career, I don't believe you have ever had one moment of sheer, healthy enjoyment!"

"Wrong again!" murmured the other. "For instance, at the present moment I am getting a great deal of sheer, healthy enjoyment out of you."

"Bah! ! !" ejaculated Tony, and was gone.

Vicomte stirred his coffee with grave deliberation.

"Strange that they should always make it too thick!" Then inconsequently: "Poor Nan!"

Towards six o'clock that afternoon Tony found himself pressing the bell of 19, Derincourt Mansions; he was crumpled, dirty, unshaven—and gloriously happy.

"Miss Hartmann?"

The servant who answered the door was somewhat deaf:

"In the drawing-room, sir," and Tony rushed with pounding heart into the presence of—Nan's mother.

"Dear me!" exclaimed that lady—then politely, "How do you do?"

"This morning," replied Tony vaguely, his eye roving over the furniture in the hope that Nan might perhaps pop up from behind a sofa—"I mean, yes, thanks."

A long social training had taught his hostess the supreme value of tact.

"Won't you sit down and have a little chat with me? Nan is out, but I expect her any moment."

She ensconced her visitor with two superfluous cushions in an armchair, and wondered how best to broach a subject which had long occupied her thoughts; namely, whether this young man were serious in his attentions to her daughter—"And if so, is he in a position to marry?"

She liked Tony well enough; his fair, open sunniness would be rather a novel asset to set against the swarthy, hooknosed and obese prey captured the year before by "that Louisa Rosenfelt".

If he were serious.

She hesitated no longer: "You and Nan get on very well together, don't you?"

"Rather!" Tony was agreeably surprised. "She—she's wonderful, you know."

"Yes, that is what her teachers used to say; and pretty. Now would you call her pretty?"

"No; she's more and less than pretty."

Mrs. Hartmann was not quite sure whether this were a compliment or the reverse; she took refuge in archness:

"Ah, you can't deceive me, young people! I've smelt a fish since a long time."

A moment's reflection showed Tony that she had lost her way between "something fishy" and "smelt a rat".

"I hope to goodness Nan won't be long", passed through his mind, and, "May I take her out for the evening?" he asked carelessly.

Mrs. Hartmann pursed up her lips. "I don't know really; I can't say. We have already allowed her a great deal more liberty than is usual, and——"

"But why ever not?" The boy sprang to his feet resolved to "have it out then and there".

"Why should there be such a fuss whenever she goes out with me? Surely I'm to be trusted; and Nan isn't a baby any more. Oh—*can't* you see how stupid it all is!"

"It isn't that we don't trust you," said Mrs. Hartmann, plunging boldly; "but you are not engaged to her."

Engaged? . . . Tony sat down again to think it over; he loved Nan, of course—yes, and she loved him; it was all as natural as the coming of crocuses in March—but engaged!

"Does it make any difference?" he asked weakly.

"Any difference? All the difference in the world!"

"Does it, though?" He drew his chair closer to hers. "Tell me—I'm awfully ignorant, I know—what exactly would happen if I were engaged to Nan?"

Mrs. Hartmann, marvelling greatly, enlightened him:

"If you proposed to her and she accepted you—you

know this as well as I do, surely!—you would go straight to her uncle; it is usually done before the actual proposal, but one can stretch a point here and there. If the interview were satisfactory——" (She hesitated at mentioning the nature of the interview: income, settlements, prospects, and the like; then decided to waive that until actually necessary, and continued): "If Mr. Hartmann were satisfied, then the engagement would be announced to all our friends; an At Home day fixed to receive congratulations—in a frock-coat, I needn't say. It is considered etiquette, too, for you to send her flowers, white flowers, besides the ring." . . .

Tony listened breathlessly as to a new and absorbing fairy-tale.

"Yes?" he said. "Go on!"

A bell rang; something in his heart gave a great leap.

"Ah," quoth Mrs. Hartmann playfully. "I needn't tell you who that is!"

—Uncle Hartmann thrust open the door, caught sight of Tony, and disappeared with an irate grunt. His sister-in-law took up the thread of her discourse again, meandering on, more for the pleasure of putting into words her secret desires, than because she imagined anyone could really exist in ignorance of the social A B C.

"You would then introduce us to your mother and to your sister—a little informal dinner is always best on those occasions, I think. For Louisa Rosenfelt's engagement they invited over sixty people, but I said at the time it was very stiff; and I daresay there would be no bother in letting you go about alone with Nan—not too often; say once a week; she would be busy with her trousseau——"

She broke off abruptly.

"But all this is, of course, merely fancy on my part—you must not take it seriously," after which masterpiece

of diplomacy she abandoned the subject and launched forth into a panegyric on the works of Arnold Bennett, whom she could never quite dissociate from Eden Philpotts:

"They both write about Lancashire!"

Tony responded to her ecstasies at random; his mind was busy with what he had just heard: proposal?—ring?—trousseau? Strange-sounding words, all leading up to a curious ceremony known, he believed, as Marriage!

Well, and why not? True, he had never thought of marriage in connection with Nan, but for this very reason the idea attracted him; Tony liked novelty. He had had a "little pal", not a few intrigues, flirtations by the dozen, a *grande passion*, even—these women one did not marry!

But then, none of them had ever been linked to the weird genius known as Parent—not obstreperously, anyhow!

White flowers? Congratulations? An outing once a week? How fascinating were all these quaint formalities, like a Dutch garden or a book by Jane Austen.

The more he thought of it, the more he became enamoured of the idea. Besides, he wanted Nan; she belonged to him; it could not be otherwise.

"Never miss an experience," Vicomte had once counselled him, and what an experience this would prove! They might even be married in a synagogue. . . .

Something impelled him to look up; Nan had entered unheard and was standing a few paces inside the room. He sprang towards her. She greeted him with the elaborate carelessness that even the thinnest veneer of civilization demands of femininity when meeting the man uppermost in her thoughts:

"Well, Boy!"

He held her hands tight between his own, looking the while imploringly at Mrs. Hartmann.

"I may take her out to-night?"

It was as if he were afraid of offending those stern gods so recently adopted by him.

Mrs. Hartmann gave permission. Nan was not to be home later than half-past nine, and (in an aside), "put on your other hat!"

. . . "Boy! ! !"

"Girl! ! !"

They were alone at last, shielded from inquiring eyes by the thrice-blesséd blinds of the taxi, able to give vent to the pent-up emotions of ten dragging days.

. . . "Girl! Kiddie Mine! This is glorious! It is worth going away; I'm going away again, so as to have the joy of coming back! I shall be always going away so as to be always coming back! I shall go to-morrow morning and come back to-morrow evening! I—Girl, can't you speak?"

"Speak?"—indignantly. "I've been speaking ever since we closed the front door behind us—but your voice is, louder than mine. I've been saying beautiful things casting pearls——"

"If I am," laughed Tony, "I insist on being a little black one with a pink nose and a curly tail; the white ones remind me of babies. Oh, but it's good to talk nonsense again. I said to our innkeeper yesterday, 'Wouldn't it be funny if this cauliflower were to turn into a sewing-machine?'—and he didn't move a muscle! . . . P'raps it sounded wrong in French: '*N'est-ce pas que ça serait drôle si ce choux-fleur*——' Girl, where shall we go to-night?"

"Can't we go on and on just as we are?"

"Yes, of course we can!—for hours if you like. I've got four and sevenpence in my pocket, and the thing-ometer has ticked three and twopence already! Oh, I say, would you mind awfully much if we pulled up now and walked the rest of the way? I dunno where we're

going, but it isn't far! Three and fourpence!—Hi! Stop! We're getting out!"

They got out. Nan slipped her hand into Tony's arm.

"I'm being vulgar," she said. "I've always envied people who were happy enough to be thoroughly vulgar in public. Can you imagine our silhouette to the eye behind?"

"Rather! The suburban clasp; I've often admired it."

"Where are we going? Theatre?"

Tony held up a shilling and a penny. "All my worldly possessions. We'll spend the evening in a Turkish cabaret I know of, just off Oxford Street; the coffee is jolly good and only threepence, and we can talk there."

. . . A dusky little shop, the air dim and heavy with smoke. At the further end about a dozen tables irregularly dotted about; brown walls hung with lurid prints of Turkish atrocities; near the door a counter supporting a few hookahs and beaten metal pots, the presiding genius, an excitable, beady-eyed Oriental; the clatter of strange tongues mingling with the rattle of dice or domino; an Armenian girl, sufficiently unpicturesque to suggest that she be the genuine, not the Whitechapel article, flitting about with gold-stemmed glasses of thick coffee; an incongruous pianola that strikes up "Jerusalem" in ragtime. . . .

Such were the surroundings amid which Nan and Tony spent their evening.

It was a good evening! A sense of nearness which might have taken months to establish had been magically created in a few days by means of paper, pen and ink.

Voluptuously they bathed in their need of each other—enjoyed it to the uttermost. And Tony forgot all about his conversation with Mrs. Hartmann.

. . . An Intense Youth, obviously out for the purpose of "seein' life", entered the café and settled himself at the next table. He glanced curiously at the couple beside him. Who were they? What was their history?

Nan caught the look, and leaned across to her companion.

"*Chéri*," she whispered, "is it, indeed, all over?"

—The Intense Youth could have chortled with delight! Life?—Why, he had walked straight into the very heart of it!

Tony took up his cue with praiseworthy promptitude.

"No," he replied. "We still have to-night!"

The Intense Youth almost fell off his chair—

"Ah yes, to-night! And what then?"

"Then you will laugh," said Tony bitterly.

"True, I will laugh—and wear the mask—and beneath it my heart will break!"

The pianola broke out in another spasm; the Intense Youth strained his ears in order to miss nothing of the drama beside him.

Tony leaned forward and gripped his companion by the wrist:

"Fifi, will you marry me?"

Nan, still in her rôle of French grisette, shook her head with a mocking smile. (She secretly thought that Tony was rather overdoing his part.) "One does not offer marriage to such as I am, foolish Englishman! You have much still to learn."

"You can teach me," murmured Tony; and again, "You can teach me!"

—The Intense Youth, with deep regret, paid for his coffee and swaggered out into the street, an article already shaping itself in his mind:

"We read much of the so-called '*Vie de Bohème*' of Paris, but to those who promenade London with their

eyes open, the grey city offers full as many opportunities of observing realism in its most subtle, most dramatic forms. Only last night I . . ." etc., etc.

Meanwhile Nan and Tony were laughing heartily.

"We've made one man happy, at any rate," quoth the Boy; then relapsed into thought. . . .

"Girl," he said abruptly; "when you talk in that fashion—the 'Fifi' fashion," he added, smiling—"do you realize at all what you are saying?"

"I—don't—know," replied Nan slowly. "It sounds all right; they always talk like that in plays and books." . . .

Tony was silent. He dimly apprehended that she spoke as a deaf man might play the piano, striking the keys, but not hearing the music he brought forth.

And there and then a resolution took root in the Boy's brain. . . .

It was raining heavily when they returned to Derincourt Mansions. Every bus was full inside. Tony and Nan were compelled to mount to the top and curl themselves up beneath a dripping mackintosh.

It did not matter! Nothing could possibly matter!

They bade each other good-bye outside the front door.

Tony ran down the steps; a sense of something important left undone kept pace with his feet; like a flash it struck him—he turned and bounded up again.

"Girl," he cried hastily, for the shadow of the porter was seen dimly advancing through the panes of glass: "Girl, will you marry me?"

"Why, yes, Boy, if you like!"

. . . There was no time for more. The door opened and shut behind her, and Tony plunged again into the outside blackness.

. . . He swung along the shiny pavements, exulting! Happiness had flitted about him moth-like, touched him

with filmy wings, cast around Nan elusive golden mists, closed her eyelids with dreams, tantalized him with whispers!

Now he had made this happiness solid, tangible, permanent; had wrapped it about with brown paper and knotted it with string. He had done it—he, Tony, not five minutes ago!

. . . Exulting, he swung along the shiny pavements; exulting, he eyed a stout, prosperous City man, laden with parcels, evidently returning to a snug and prosperous home.

"My brother!" murmured Tony out of the fullness of his heart. . . .

. . . The moon wrapped herself in clouds and wept; another of her army of Pierrots had deserted her, had become one of those who would fain see her on their supper-tables in the guise of a Dutch cheese. . . .

The moon wept!

CHAPTER XVI

"AND THE WORLD SAID——!"

It is a popular fallacy that all the world loves a lover; ill-advised people, like the Editor of Pears' Annual and Marcus Stone, R.A., have done much to foster this illusion; they have bred in our minds perpetual images of high-waisted maiden and high-souled youth tripping joyously towards a church porch, whilst onlookers vie with each other as to who should cast the most roses to render soft their path!

Alas, if it were but so!

The world does not love a lover. Radiant couples with arms and hearts entwined merely serve as a

spectacle for amusement, boredom or irritation. They are warned of the fatal consequences of their passion; awful examples are dangled before their eyes. They are each informed of the horrible past of the other, and the faults which might lead to a still more horrible future are carefully pointed out; then they are told what each says about the other behind the other's back!

If the lovers prove still undaunted, the world adopts a different method—that of leaving them entirely to their own devices, and yawning audibly when the unhappy pair dare to approach within a mile of their fellow-creatures; this rarely fails to evoke a double suicide. But should the victims survive, the world gives in! On the eve of the wedding, the high-souled youth is treated to a "drink-and-be-merry-poor-old-chap-for-to-morrow-you-die" banquet from his bachelor comrades, and the high-waisted maiden lies on her sobbing mother's breast and is told the whole truth about that Brute Man!

After which, they are graciously permitted to wed! . . .

Tony's interview with Uncle Hartmann proved most unsatisfactory—from the latter's point of view, at all events.

The Boy had studied with a view to electrical engineering—studied fairly thoroughly. Subsequently he had filled a succession of berths, each one abruptly terminated by what Vicomte called an outbreak of Tony-ism—the desire for novelty, romance, fresh air! The chafing against anything which approached rules or control.

Finally, a year or so before, the young gentleman made up his mind to dispense altogether with regular occupation. He had a hundred pounds a year of his own, and lived at home with his mother; moreover, his tastes were not expensive.

So why work?

. . . "But I'll get something to do now, of course," he assured Uncle Hartmann. "Oh yes, of course, and I've two pounds a week coming in, and mother will always help. Nan doesn't mind waiting for me, either; she said so. We shall rub along capitally, don't you worry!"

Mr. Hartmann was almost speechless; up to now he had believed Tony the possessor of at least a fairly adequate income—say, five hundred per annum.

"But—but—on what, then, did you—did you *presume* to become engaged?"

Tony enlightened him in a particularly neat simile: something to do with a diviner, and a hazel-twig which stayed immobile till scenting water, then commenced to leap violently. He was the diviner, with hazel-twig forever outstretched—in vain, till he met Nan!

Mr. Hartmann remained unappreciative. He wanted to know where his niece's breakfast, lunch and dinner were to come from? His voice rose steadily in volume; it was a fairly robust voice to begin with!

"I can't forbid the engagement, I suppose," he wound up. "As I know human nature, that would simply drive you both to some worse folly. But understand that I heartily disapprove! Also that you must start at once looking out for a job, and not be always hanging about Nan. Why, when I was a young man" (etc. . . . etc. . . .). "My only comfort lies in the fact that within six months you will be heartily sick of the whole business—yes, yes, I know all that"—checking Tony's vehement protestations—"I know all that, and I repeat that within six months not a vestige of this mighty love will remain, and both of you sorry for having made such asses of yourselves! Absurd! Ridiculous! Pshaw! ! !"

Mrs. Hartmann on the subject was a mild repetition of her brother-in-law, with slight variations; she prophesied complete social extinction: "your prospects ruined, and when he gets tired of you, there you are! The laughing-stock of everyone, and your chances gone for ever! !" She dwelt wistfully on the Other Man, the little fellow who had met Nan one afternoon at the Rosenfelts and became enamoured of her. The Other Man had asked Mrs. Rosenfelt if there were any possible chance for him, and this, alas, had come to Mrs. Hartmann's knowledge exactly half an hour after she had egged Tony on to propose.

"He would be such a splendid match for you, Nan!—Connie would simply jump at the offer!"

Nan fled for consolation to the Heliotrope Lady, who embraced her tenderly and bade her not listen to what anybody said.

"Not that I myself think Tony ought to marry," she mused. "He is the living image of his grandfather, an out-and-outer if ever there was one; nearly broke my mother's heart. But I hope you will be very happy, my dear!"

—"I believe in heredity, too!" she added thoughtfully.

Tony's attitude at this period was that of a convict, who, carefully polishing his fetters, remarks how nice and bright they are, and how prettily they jingle. He had proudly insisted upon having their engagement made public, with the result that when Nan returned home, slightly more depressed than when she had set out, she found her mother feebly parrying the onslaughts of the Important Aunt-by-Marriage, the representative vanguard of an agitated Family.

This good lady, who suffered from advanced opinions, dwelt mainly on the Problem of Children: how they invariably arrive when unwanted, not singly but in

twos and threes, and the Wickedness of Maternity when the Offspring could not Develop its Personality amid Beauty and Plenty.

. . . Nan could have shrieked to her to stop; they were spoiling her rainbow-coloured bubble, these people with their clumsy fingers!—spoiling it!

Letters of congratulation arrived by every post. Two especially, from her favourite comrades of lost Bohemia, caused Nan much anxious thought:

Dear little Pal,

So you are engaged! I suppose I ought to wish you the usual sickly piffle, but, to speak frankly, I feel rather blue. You know I was always quite sure that one day you would somehow express yourself in Art, but now, of course, all that is U P. Marriage is bound to blight a career! You can't remain One of Us when your head is stuffed full of a man.

I am awfully disappointed, and think it a rotten shame, but of course accept my very best wishes for a bright future, and don't forget your chum of old times.

Jerry.

The other letter was from Philippa Merrick and was somewhat involved; she talked a great deal about Individual Temperaments; from the glimpse she had caught of Tony's, she did not think it likely to blend with Nan's—the colours were not in harmony! Nan's nature, she was sure, called out for gold arabesques embroidered in the woof of her life's texture. The epistle closed with a metaphor of a vibrating organ note which when struck too often would shiver the painted window of a cathedral.

It was all very beautiful and very worrying!

Johnny, who might really have been relied on for a little sympathy, told Nan bluntly that she was a fool to

think of marrying a poor man, and he drew moving pictures of wedded misery on insufficient means: shabby clothes, harassing bills, petty squabbles, dingy apartments.

Johnny could on occasions be a logical and eloquent speaker!

. . . "If the Family starts on me this afternoon, it will be the last straw," murmured Nan, on the doorstep of Derincourt Mansions.

Tony, very conscious of his silk hat, was too busy struggling with a pair of grey suède gloves to give an adequate response. A brougham stood in readiness before the door, for this was Saturday afternoon, and the engaged couple were driven forth to pay a round of formal calls.

—"Never done it in my life before!" chuckled Tony. "Where are we going first and what am I to say?"

"You're not to say!" enjoined Nan sternly. "There is trouble enough already because you sent me red roses instead of white lilies. They will ask you questions and you must answer 'I don't know!' to everything."

"But I don't want to be taken for an idiot! I—Girl! Soldiers! Look!"

They both leaned eagerly out of the window.

"When I'm a grown-up man," announced Tony, after the last glittering splash of gold and scarlet had passed, "I'm going to save up all my pennies and put them in a box with a slit in it; and when I've collected a great lot I'll break open the box and buy a Life-Guardsman for my very own—a real one, not stuffed—and he shall come riding through the nursery doors on his horse—when I'm grown-up!"

The brougham halted outside a ponderous mansion that reminded one vaguely of a City alderman replete with turtle soup.

"What are they called, Girl? Quick—I've forgotten!" —clutching Nan desperately in the hall.

"Aunt Teresa and Uncle James!"

But practically the whole of the Family was assembled in the vast drawing-room—(Oh, memories of long-dead day-at-homes!)—and It literally fell upon Nan and Tony, so that when they were able at last to make their escape, it was with the sensations of two picked bodies after the onslaught of the vultures.

. . . "The old lady with the cameo brooch in her hair said that marriage was a lottery!" gasped Tony, from the depths of the brougham; "the rest was confusion, but she said marriage was a lottery! She seemed so pleased at having discovered that, that she said it lots of times. Who is she?"

"It sounds like Aunt Huldah!"

"And the gent with the proboscis that took the wrong turning—what was he telling you in the corner?"

Nan remained silent. What Uncle James had actually said to her was:

"Learn cooking! Learn sewing! Should have done so years ago. Last girl in the world to marry a poor man. Man's an animal. Wants feeding. Wants comfort. Marries for it. Man myself, so ought to know. Brain's no good when the soup's burnt. Mark my words."

She did mark them, and her depression increased by leaps and bounds.

At Rosenfelts', Tony was left to entertain Connie and Louisa and Louisa's husband, while Nan was swept away to Mrs. Rosenfelt's bedroom to be talked to "seriously"—"At your mother's request". Religion was here the leitmotif, and the folly of marrying away from one's own race; the theme was one which held possibilities, and the well-meaning lady made the most of them! "Look at Louisa, how happy she is!" . . .

"Thank goodness, we're spending to-morrow with Sadie!" was Nan's last waking thought that night.

. . . . .

The Girl and Boy sat on a bench in Kensington Gardens. On the smooth, shining surface of the Round Pond a solitary pirate in a red jersey sailed a solitary white-sailed frigate. The sky was a pale wintry blue; a few leaves still hung loosely from the bare black boughs. Yet the air was stirred with that pure, exhilarating spring-like promise which sometimes reigns in late autumn.

"Girl," said the Boy solemnly, "we are going to make a success of our love!"

"Of course we are"; and proudly she flung back her head.

"Thousands who have felt just as we do at the outset, have wrecked their lives for a mere nothing. We will prove that it is as possible for two people to live a perfect romance now as it ever was."

Again the Girl assented.

"We will leave each other absolutely free," the Boy went on—"free to do as we like, go where we like. Our trust will be deep enough for that; jealousy is for fools, not"—he paused and laughed—"not for modern lovers!"

The Girl chimed in:

"If, for instance, you feel at any time a wish to be quit of me for a while, just say: 'Girl, I'm off for a few days!'—and I shall understand, and ask no questions."

"Nothing need ever come between us if we agree to 'have it out' at once—all the little clouds and misunderstandings; leave them alone and they grow too big to grapple with." . . .

"Think how much more keenly, more intensely, two people can live their lives, than one; we shall cram

every moment with colour—my head is bursting with plans: things I have always wanted to do, and now——"

"We shall do them together."

They talked on and on, raising from the moth-eaten patches of grass, færy palaces and cities and battlements, till the still air glowed and quivered. . . .

Twelve strokes of noon boomed out from a neighbouring clock-tower. "Sadie will be waiting for us," quoth the Girl, and they rose and strolled away.

. . . And Two-Who-Knew-Better, sitting at the far end of the bench, followed the twain with a whimsical smile—then glanced furtively at each other, and the smile died away. . . .

"Shall we call them back and tell them?" asked He-Who-Knew-Better, but—

"Certainly not!" snapped She-Who-Knew-Better; then more gently, "No, why should we?" . . .

. . . . . .

A surprise awaited Tony at Streatham Hill, a surprise of which the main ingredients were a black satin sling and a pair of mocking light-green eyes.

"I left 'l'Hirondelle Bleue' yesterday morning," explained Vicomte, "and called here on the off-chance of finding you. Your sister gave me the news! Accept my warmest congratulations!"

His tone was admirable in its grave sincerity; but Tony felt like a naughty schoolboy up for a whipping.

"I—we——" he stammered; the entrance of Andrew effectually cut him short.

He of the Heavy Hoof had known Wymondham only very slightly before the latter's departure, four years before; oddly enough, he seemed to take pleasure in renewing the acquaintance, and not infrequently during dinner invited his guest to join him in poking time-honoured jokes at Nan and Tony—jokes which took

their place in the first row of Eternity between Mothers-in-law and Twins.

After the meal, whilst they all hung languidly over their coffee and cigarettes, Andrew waxed sentimental.

"When I first met Sadie, she wore pale green with water-lilies in her hair," from which point he followed his wooing in detail, winding up with an exact verbal repetition of the witticism of his "best man" in the vestry.

Tired out, but happy, he then retired for a well-earned forty winks.

The afternoon wore on. Sadie had somehow spirited Wymondham away to the library to examine—well, early folios, let us say; Nan and Tony had not noticed the exact moment when they disappeared. . . .

. . . An intense drowsy hush brooding over the earth; the rattle of an occasional vehicle—the monotonous chimes from a far-away church; the fire is noisy, very noisy—it stirs and shifts continually, and the tongues of flame flicker audibly in the stillness . . . tramp . . . tramp . . . and the lamplighter goes his rounds; the footsteps die away again; if human beings can be said to browse, they browse on Sundays between three and six o'clock.

. . . The Girl and Boy lounge in contented silence on the rug . . . he draws her nearer to him and his mouth closes on hers—lingers there. . . . She quivers and lies inert, with the same sense of breathless expectation as had seized her at the window on that hot summer night at Greylawns, and again three years later, passing Kenrick Marsden by the piano.

She can feel something thumping against her sides—her heart?—no, Tony's! Thump! Thump! What can be the matter with him?

. . . She moves away, half affrighted. Tony is no more Tony, but Man—the eternal Man. And now she

sees with a flash of illumination that henceforth she is thrown on her own resources, must trust to her own guidance and instincts. Green limelight for evil, gold limelight for good—but the man in the wings has muddled them—or her eyes are too dazed to see. . . .

. . . "I *must* kiss you," whispers Tony in her ear; "let me—I must." . . .

Did they know about this?—the people who had warned her? Did they know it would come to her? Was that what they meant by all the careful injunctions, and must-nots, and young-girls-don't? . . . and if so, why—why had they not spoken more clearly? Told her what to do? How far to go? The meaning of it all? . . . No, they can never have known. Worlds and problems are opening outside the old stilted code of rules—rules that she has voluntarily abandoned; when Modern Maid slips anchor and goes adventuring, she scorns the use of chart and compass.

And in twenty years or so she will be taught enough of the open seas to afford to scorn them!

. . . Not yet! Not yet. . . .

. . . . .

The door-handle rattled; Tony released her from his embrace. . . .

"Now then, you two!" cried Andrew, entering pinker than ever from his sleep. "We know what it means when certain people forget to switch on the light!"

Nan ran upstairs for her hat and coat, bidding good-bye to Sadie on the way. She sang as she went; what had so troubled her?—the world was a good place, and no possible harm could lie in a kiss!

Andrew accompanied her to the door. "I should like to assure you again," he said fussily, "how very pleased we all are to welcome you amongst us. Tony is a charming fellow, a very charming fellow; such a pity

that he is so terribly lacking in business instincts; he'll always let himself be rooked right and left, but there, we must do the best we can for him." With which cheery prophecies the little man shook her warmly by the hand and bade her adieu.

Wymondham stayed on to supper and towards ten o'clock accompanied Tony home.

"Come in and have a smoke in my 'den'?"

Two deep and very battered leather armchairs, a punching-ball suspended from the ceiling, and some glaring prints of red automobiles racing furiously round a bright blue track, these were the most striking features of the apartment, till the eye fell upon a velvet curtain half concealing a most lovely and delicate reproduction in gleaming white marble of "Le Baiser" by Rodin.

"So you are engaged!"

The light irony of his friend's tone grated unpleasantly on the Boy's already overstrung nerves.

"Any objection?"

"None whatever! On the contrary, I think your conduct worthy of the highest praise"; he paused to relight his cigarette. "By-the-bye, have you told——"

"No," shortly, "I haven't."

"Is that wise?"

Tony fidgeted. "I don't want a scene!" he burst out at length. "I hate scenes! Why can't I gradually let things slide? She's bound to notice a difference in my manner."

Vicomte said nothing; unconsciously the other's voice took on a pleading note:

"It would so spoil the—the wonder of it all—and I'm not good at explaining matters. How can I go to her and say: 'I'm engaged to be married'?—it would be brutal!"

"On the contrary," Vicomte gently contradicted, "I think the statement would appeal to her sense of

humour: married! papa and mamma! relations! a nice little flat in Maida Vale, shall we say?—two offsprings, one general servant, and a devoted wife to wave good-bye to you when you set out for the office every morning! —it's bound to amuse her."

The Boy flushed crimson. "You can spare your gibes," he sulked. "And as for telling her about Nan, why—what about your beloved Versailles style? Were they so set on truth and candour then?"

"Then?" Vicomte laughed superbly. "Oh, you foolish little Pierrot, do you really compare your moon-struck efforts to love, with the days when we brought the science of Eros to its most finely-wrought and, polished perfection? When not a movement of the cane or flicker of the eyelash but was studied with a view to the finished scheme. You—you are playing with shadows—and clumsily at that! Prating like a parson of marriage!—Marriage!"—the term fell like a thing of living scorn from the man's lips. "Why, the word was allowed to rust at the Court of Louis! I believe the *bourgeois* sometimes spoke it."

Tony's foot came in contact with the table on which stood a syphon and glasses, and brought it down with a crash.

Vicomte stood up.

"I must be off," said he. "Doubtless you are right in holding your tongue; who knows, you may still find use for the—other woman! Even Romeo remained a man." Then his manner softened and changed.

"Good-night, Tony! You are not angry with me?"

"No, but——"

"Without a 'but'?"

Tony still hung back; he needed only to put one finger in the corner of his mouth to complete his resemblance to a petulant child.

"Tony, forgive me for teasing, and I'll be best man

at your wedding—white camellia, patent-leather boots and inane expression, all complete! Come, you can surely appreciate such a colossal sacrifice to your wounded feelings?"

The Boy laughed. "Don't be an ass! Good-night."

"Good-night."

Tony banged and bolted the hall door and went slowly up to his bedroom; once or twice he shook his shoulders as if to rid himself of a disturbing thought.

. . . "I am in love this time."

"I am!" fiercely plunging his head and shoulders into a basin of cold water.

"Of course I am!" and Tony tumbled into bed.

CHAPTER XVII

LE CHÂTEAU EN ESPAGNE

ANDREW was going away.

He had been summoned to Scotland on business. He might be gone three days.

"Shall I take my overcoat with the fur collar, Sadie, as well as the other?"

Sadie was perusing a telegram which had at that moment arrived. She glanced up with knitted brows.

"Yes, dear, of course."

"I don't see where 'of course' comes in," replied Andrew. "It will be very heavy to carry, and I shall be back by Friday at the latest. It seems hardly worth while to bother myself with two overcoats."

Sadie took a sheet of letter-paper and started to scribble a note. A gleam of mischief replaced the frown in her eyes.

"Sadie, I am not taking my fur overcoat!"

"Very well, dear."

"But would you—in my place?"

Sadie conscientiously tried to put herself in Andrew's place. It was difficult.

"No, I don't think so," she said at length. "Andrew, won't you miss your train?"

"The clock points to a quarter-past eleven," said Andrew carefully; "that clock is five minutes fast. It is therefore ten minutes past eleven. My train leaves Euston at twelve-five. I must allow forty minutes by Underground from here to Euston. If I leave the house now it will give me fifteen minutes' margin. Ten is ample. Sadie!"

Sadie started; she thought he was going on for ever, and had got used to the sound of his voice. "Yes?"

"You are sure you would rather not stay with your mother while I am away?"

"Quite sure. Good-bye, dear; have you put a muffler and a tin of grape-nuts in your bag?" Sadie was undoubtedly an excellent wife.

The front door slammed.

A minute later the key was heard to grind in the lock. Andrew appeared.

"Sadie, I think I'll take the fur overcoat, after all. It looks better when I call on McCulloch."

"Very well, dear; it's hanging in the cupboard."

"But don't *you* think so?" persisted Andrew, who always liked his resolutions backed by outside opinion.

"Yes, dear."

"But you said before——"

"Andrew, you'll miss that train!"

"Good-bye, darling."

"Good-bye."

He really was gone.

Then Sadie re-read the telegram: *You will sup with me to-night at 'le Château en Espagne'—ten o'clock.*

"And not even 'reply paid' so certain is he of my coming!" She tilted her head mutinously. . . . "If he had said: 'Will you sup with me?'—but no, he issues his commands: 'You will sup with me to-night!' We shall see, Monsieur le Vicomte! I might have a fancy to invite another guest—at your expense, too!"

She rang the bell and gave orders for her letter to be instantly despatched by special messenger. It was addressed to "Richard Bellew, Esq."

. . . . .

Deep buried in the heart of Soho lies a tumble-down tavern; you take a narrow passage that runs by the side of Luski, the biggest pawnbroker in Frith Street; then turn sharply to the left, and the second on the right will land you in a roughly-cobbled courtyard. A red light twinkling over a low doorway betrays to the initiated the back entrance to "Le Château en Espagne". Front entrance certainly exists—it can be seen from the first-floor windows, but no one has yet discovered by what devious routes it is to be attained. So the patrons of "Le Château en Espagne" continue to enter by the back. This necessity has its charms; plots and pass-words, cloaked gallants and hooded ladies, float in rapid procession through the mind. You swagger up the dark passage and have much ado to prevent yourself summoning old Jean Polignac with a noisy, "Holà, within there! Od's bodikins!" (whatever that may be).

Jean Polignac, the owner of the place, had inherited it from his father, who in turn received it from his grandfather. He, rumour says, had been chef to Monsignor le Cardinal de Rohan, and had fled France when the Revolution swept the country. Certain it is that recipes for the preparing of special dishes in a most delicious manner had been handed down from Polignac

to Polignac, and obtained for "Le Château en Espagne" a growing reputation amongst the gourmets and epicures of London town.

. . . Twenty minutes to ten—too late for diners, too early for those who come to sup.

"It is good to rest," reflected Polignac.

He glanced with pride at the carefully-arranged little tables with their gleaming white napery and shining glass and silver. Then his eye clouded as rattling window-panes, creaking doors, and torn, faded hangings obtruded themselves on his notice. There was not enough money flowing in as yet to renovate the ravages of two-hundred years of wind and weather.

"I should like to paper the walls in blue with pink bouquets," murmured Jean, in whose sight dark oak and heavy rafters found no favour.

"*Bon soir*, Polignac!" quoth Alister Wymondham.

Jean rose deliberately; his manner was soothing after a surfeit of obsequious and flurried waiters.

"*Bon soir*, Monsieur. You will require a little supper to-night?"

"For two, yes! Give us the table in the alcove; send out for some red carnations—oh, and, Polignac, your special *œufs aux champignons*, please."

"You can trust me, Monsieur." Slowly and ponderously Jean quitted the room.

A party of four met him on the threshold; a youthful, hilarious party of four, in the satisfactory proportions of two males to two females; a party of four who would doubtless sing and clink glasses and make enough noise to cover altogether conversation carried on in low voices in an alcove.

"Everybody has their uses!" mused Vicomte.

The minutes ticked on; presently a young gentleman appeared, with an over-confident gait and a diamond stud in his shirt. He stood hesitating; obviously this

was his first visit to "Le Château en Espagne"; equally obviously, the "Piccadilly" or the "Trocadero" would have suited him far better. He glanced uneasily at the faded tapestries, at the riotous party of four.

"Rummy little hole," he informed his diamond stud; the entrance of Polignac opened up fresh fields of perplexity: the young gentleman was uncertain whether it was *de rigueur* to address him as one addressed Signor Oddenino or a waitress at an A.B.C.

"Supper, Monsieur? And for how many?"

Vicomte stepped forward:

"Wait a little, Polignac; this is a friend of mine."

With a murmured word of welcome, Jean departed to lay another cover at the table in the alcove.

"You!" exclaimed Bellew, amazed. "Did she invite you too?"

This told the Vicomte all he wished to know; he had met the lad many times at Streatham Hill.

"Little devil!" thought he with an inward smile—and by "little devil" he certainly did not mean Dick Bellew.

Meantime there was the latter to be disposed of. Vicomte had not the slightest intention that his evening's *tête-à-tête* should become a trio.

. . . Five minutes to ten; presently Sadie would appear. There was not time to be lost.

"Sit down with me, won't you? No, I've been invited by nobody; I often drop in here—the cooking is excellent, you'll find. All the same, I should have thought the place rather out of your line."

"No, no!"—loftily. "I enjoy dropping into—er—'la Vee de Bohame' occasionally"—Bellew glanced with a knowing look at his companion, whom, to tell the truth, he secretly admired. "Between ourselves, Wymondham, I—I'm expecting a lady."

Wymondham showed no signs of moving.

"Yes," he said gravely, nay, almost sadly, "so I feared."

"Feared?" A haughty inflexion crept into the boyish voice. "May I ask——?"

The other leaned across the table. "Bellew, I am going to talk to you as man to man!"

Bellew slightly relaxed his awful dignity.

"You are supping to-night with Mrs. Morrice," continued Vicomte.

"I didn't say so"—quickly.

"No, but—forgive me—I have noticed that you admire her; I know too that her husband is in Scotland to-night; it was at her house that we were introduced; your first words to me to-night were: 'Has she invited you too?' My deduction was obvious."

Dick Bellew fidgeted with the forks and spoons, a ghastly fear haunting him that he had not used the discretion to be expected of a man of the world.

"I suppose we can rely on you——" he started.

"Implicitly, of course. But—again forgive me—do you think you're behaving altogether fairly towards Andrew Morrice?"

"That"—crushingly—"is a matter which concerns Mrs. Morrice and myself."

Vicomte did not appear to notice the rebuff. "I've been an old friend of the family for many years. I take an interest in them. Mr. Morrice worships his wife; she is fond of him, too, though with the calm, gentle affection one entertains for a man thirteen years one's senior; no matter—they are happy. Then—then you come along!" Vicomte's voice trembled with righteous indignation. . . . "You come along! You—with riches, wit, youth on your side! You flatter her, dazzle her——"

Polignac approached with the wine-list. Vicomte waved him away. . . .

"—She listens to you, is swept off her feet, meets you in all sorts of compromising places! One day her husband will discover the whole affair——"

He paused impressively.

"Bellew, it will break his heart!"

Dick began to feel himself a veritable scoundrel!

"Andrew Morrice, when roused, is a man of violent passions," continued Vicomte—(poor little pink Andrew!). "He will in all probability turn her out! What then, I ask?"

Bellew drew himself up proudly. "She will come to me."

"Yes, she will come to you"—the speaker's voice sank again to those low, earnest tones that were so effective. "She will come to you—through the mud; her honour besmirched; her future clouded; an exile from Society; a by-word in everybody's mouth. If it is to that you want to drag the woman you love, I have no more to say to you." . . .

Dick remained silent for a long time.

"What can I do?" he asked at length, humbly, imploringly.

"You must give her up," decreed the stern judge opposite him.

"Give her up?"

"Yes. Leave this place—now. Don't write to her; don't attempt to see her. It will hurt her at first—in time she will forget. She will settle down again to a placid, untroubled existence with her husband. It is better so!"

"And I?" cried poor Dick.

"Someone must suffer," quoth Vicomte. "Somebody's heart must ache!"—with vague reminiscences of a drawing-room ballad. "You are strong! You are man enough to conceal your pain! Under a sickly mask of mirth"—he hesitated, wondering just how much

his victim would swallow!—"Under a sickly mask of mirth will be hidden the bleeding roots of a torn-out passion. She—others—will wrong you in their thoughts, but with you will rest the consciousness of having behaved nobly, chivalrously!"

Vicomte had drawn the picture well. Anyone who had the misfortune, like Dick, to be born chubby, will understand the lad's intense longing to be hollow and interesting. The rôle just conjured up of the misunderstood hero renouncing his desires and passing with bowed head into the night, was too attractive to resist. Dick was very, very young; he did not resist it!

Silently he rose to his feet. Silently he slipped on his coat and took his hat from the rack. Then he held out his hand to Alister Wymondham. "I am—going," he said. "Thank you for—putting things in that way. Perhaps you'll do me one more favour, and see—her—home for me when she arrives to-night. Good-bye!"

The other wrung his hand. Bellew smiled a sad, sweet smile. Then he departed.

. . . "We shall only be two for supper, after all," quoth Vicomte softly to Jean Polignac.

CHAPTER XVIII

A FLOURISH OF LACE RUFFLES

. . . TWENTY-FIVE minutes past ten. And one by one the little tables claimed their occupants—young, elegant and blasé; old, shabby and gay, they thronged into "Le Château en Espagne" to taste of the dishes that had once pleased the palate of Monsignor le Cardinal de Rohan.

Vicomte stood in the shadow of the dusky window-curtains, looking down into the courtyard below.

. . . "Madame la Marquise is late! She should have arrived by now, heralded by the flicker of torches. The heavy tread of men's feet echo on the flag-stones as they set down the sedan-chair beneath the circle of red light. . . . A little white hand flutters through the window; the black page, running behind, throws open the panelled door, inset with a medallion of Venus and her doves; then the tiniest foot in the world is thrust out and withdrawn again. What?—is there no one to assist her? . . . With beating heart beneath my flowered grey satin vest, I descend and help her alight . . . her fingers rest for an instant in mine—I kiss them! 'Monsieur le Vicomte, you presume!' . . . She pretends to mighty indignation; but I can see a smile trembling just where the moon-shaped black patch calls attention to a stray dimple. She trips up the stairs, casts aside her rose-lined hood and mantle——"

The appearance of a jolting four-wheeler beneath the globe of crimson light disturbed these fragrant reflections. With a little sigh, Vicomte pulled himself back to realities and hurried down to settle with the cursing Jehu on the box.

"Couldn't find the blasted plice no'ow, Mister . . ."

"There wasn't a taxi left on the rank," Sadie explained, "that's why I'm so late."

She was annoyed, having especially intended to be early; a swift glance around convinced her that Bellew was not present. She had invited him for ten o'clock—he must have come and gone. Had Vicomte repaid her trick by some counter-trick? His face told her nothing. Well, at least she need not give him the satisfaction of seeming curious or discomforted, even though he knew that she knew he knew! Sadie parted her lips in a rosy yawn. . . .

"Where are we sitting?" she queried. "Over there in the recess? What lovely carnations!" She took one and pinned it in the filmy black ninon of her corsage; she looked pretty—very pretty! Vicomte, gazing at her over the medley of crystal, red petals, and gleaming silver, felt glad that Dick Bellew had been made to see the error of his ways!

"It is good to be alone with you, Marquise"; and demurely she replied:

"Yes, I have been looking forward to it."

For the second time Poiignac hovered with the wine-list. Wymondham chose a special brand of Burgundy.

"It will tone with the carnations," he remarked. Sadie threw him a quizzical glance.

"If I were to come across you in a book, Vicomte, I should call you overdrawn."

"But, my dear Marquise, so I am—disgracefully overdrawn; so is everybody. It *is* only in books and on the stage that we meet those excessively natural people who do such perfectly natural things in such a charmingly natural manner!" He assisted her to *hors d'œuvres*.

"Some of that delicate green mess with the orange-coloured splash, please; it resembles a Post-Impressionist's idea of Hell."

"My idea of Hell," mused Vicomte, skilfully impaling an olive on his fork, "is the Woman who Won't!"

"And mine," rejoined Sadie, "is the Man who Once Did!"

"Then you will never enter Hell, Marquise, for the Man who Once Did, in your case, Always Will!"

. . . A man with pale, delicate features, a sad mouth and quantities of straight black hair, entered the restaurant and ensconced himself moodily at the table nearest them, the sole one remaining vacant. He looked as if he might have a history.

"And he has!" struck in Wymondham, divining his companion's thoughts. "I happen to know it; shall I tell it to you?"

"Please!"

"He is a poet—yes, I know he looks like one, but in occasional cases the two things are synonymous; he is a poet. His search was ever for the Ideal. He found it at last—or thought he found it—in a grimy restaurant in the Italian quarter, the sort of place with a dirty placard in the window announcing; 'Spaghetti, three-halfpence; spaghetti with onions, twopence.' Night after night our poet suffered the squalid atmosphere so as to breathe the air she breathed—the daughter of the restaurateur. He wrote her verses (which she did not understand), comparing her to a pure white lily growing in the mire.

"At the end of two years she married the waiter.

"And our poet writes no more verses, and women are to him as Dead Sea fruit. He drinks, that is all—is slowly drinking himself into the grave!"

"Is that why he has ordered Perrier water with his supper?" inquired Sadie; but before Vicomte could open his lips to speak, a fresh-faced little woman in a check silk blouse entered the room hastily and seated herself opposite the poet; her voice was loud and penetrating:

"I couldn't get away till now—Baby was so fretful; I wish you'd have let me send for the doctor, Alfred."

"There's nothing the matter with her," rejoined Alfred testily. "If you understood more about the state of the coal trade, you wouldn't be so ready to run up bills." . . .

Sadie said not a word; her eye was inquiring! Vicomte shrugged his shoulders in comical despair:

"I did my best for him, grant me that! If the fellow has *no* sense of the fitness of things——" he sought consolation in *œufs aux champignons.*

"There is nothing in the world I love so well as *œufs aux champignons*—except you, Marquise!"

"Monsieur le Vicomte, you presume!"

He looked up, startled. "You said that as Gabrielle might have said it!"

"Who is Gabrielle?"—marvelling at the strangely tender note in his voice.

. . . "The rustle of brocade . . ." murmured Vicomte . . . "the half-elusive suggestion of a girlish laugh, and then: 'Monsieur le Vicomte, you presume!' . . . She was only eighteen when they —killed her . . ."

Sadie felt the moisture dim her eyes, to her dying day she could not explain why!

"Tell me about her," she whispered.

. . . "It was while the Pompadour ruled Louis, and Louis lazily misruled France. Her name was Gabrielle de Sélincour. I was one of the Garde du Corps—a graceful shadow of the king's morals. You know the Temple of Diana in the Parc du Petit Trianon?—from there one can catch a gleam of the fountains tossing aloft their silver spray. There, too, we used to meet. She was not witty, but just clever enough to appreciate my wit. Once she danced the minuet with me between the clipped hedges; her hair was like yours, pale gold where the sun struck on it. Boucher painted her thus—at her husband's desire."

"She was married, then?"

He looked at his guest with sudden mischief. "All the women I have ever loved have been married. It robs an *affaire de cœur* of its one danger."

"Which is?"

"Marriage!" Wymondham's dreamy mood had passed as swiftly as the wine he tossed down his throat.

"You had better not let Tony hear you," advised Sadie. "In his present frame of mind——"

"Ah, Tony! Tony is to me a source of never-ending delight. He is now a Business Man, spelt with capital letters."

"Yes, Andrew found him a berth in an electrical firm."

"—Arrive at nine a.m. sharp, leave at seven p.m.—and one can hear him wringing the honest sweat from his brow when he returns home in the evening: drip, drip, down the passage! He is preparing for the state of Blesséd Matrimony; following his sister's example. Why did you marry Andrew?"

Sadie almost jumped, the question came so suddenly.

"For love," she replied.

Vicomte raised one eyebrow. "Then why, oh, why imperil your bliss by supping with me at 'Le Château en Espagne'?"

"Oh, because—because I am bored."

"People who marry for love——" started Vicomte softly.

"I married for money!"

. . . In the courtyard below, a vagrant musician fiddled for stray pennies. He brought his bow across his strings with a jarring discord. Then stopped. The clatter of voices in the room rose loud and shrill. . . .

Vicomte leaned forward: "I never asked you before—so it was really that?"

"Yes. I was tired of having the second-best of everything. I wanted first-best. And I quite meant to play the game by Andrew."

"Then why not—play the game?"

Sadie laughed lightly, a little bitterly too.

"Do you remember the dress I wore when you met me in Regent Street?" . . .

"It was black velvet."

"And what am I wearing now?"

Wymondham reflected an instant. "The same, I believe."

"Exactly—always the same; it's getting rather shabby, too; you see, four months after our honeymoon, Andrew broke the news to me that our income would be reduced by about two-thirds; a swindling partner or something. . . . 'But we still have each other, darling', he said; 'nothing matters while we have each other'—and he kissed me. When he kisses me my soul shrinks away into the very furthermost corner of my body, and then my body curls up and tries to get inside my soul!"

The fiddler started again, a maddening Highland fling. . . .

"Poor little Marquise," said Wymondham caressingly, after a long pause. "Is it as bad as that?"

"No, it isn't really," Sadie helped herself to ice-cream. "I only said it because the phrase sounded well. Don't make me out a tragedy, for Heaven's sake!"

She proceeded to recount in detail the scene in which Andrew had broken to her the news of his losses; her mimicry was excellent.

"He is quite a dear little man if only he would keep step; it's terrible to march alongside a man who insists on putting out his right foot whenever I put out the left. And he always seems to be there! How did your Gabriele de Sélincour dispose of her husband whilst she trod pavanes with you on the lawn of St. Germain?"

A smile as of some amusing recollection hovered round her companion's lips.

"There were ways and means," he confessed. "I even took it upon myself to arrange little journeys for Monsieur le Marquis de Sélincour!—the King would

dispatch him to Orleans or Nantes—I had done perhaps some slight service to the King. Or, again, Mademoiselle Chérisette, of Le Théâtre Antoine, would entice de Sélincour to her villa at Fontainebleau—and, alas! he could never play the elderly Lothario without discovery! —I saw to that also! . . . What wonder that Gabrielle indignantly refused him speech for two or three weeks after? I was known then as the Prince of Intrigue—and all thought out so delicately, like winding the mazes of a Court dance, in which a false step would utterly ruin the *tout-ensemble*."

He sighed regretfully.

Sadie nibbled at a fig. "Please don't arrange to have Andrew enticed by a Mdlle. Chérisette from the Gaiety; I should be seriously annoyed."

"I could part you and Andrew within six weeks—if I chose."

She shook her head. "We're far from Versailles now, and you will have to deal with men and women—not puppets strutting in their laces and brocades."

"A knitted waistcoat or an embroidered satin vest, Marquise, makes very little difference to the heart beneath."

"Heart, indeed!" scoffed his hearer; "I should call it by another name. And Prince of Intrigue you may be, but I, for one, doubt your powers."

"That's a challenge!" He lifted his glass and bowed to her over the rim; "I accept your challenge, Marquise!" The glass crashed to the ground and was shivered to a hundred fragments. People turned and stared.

"Let us be effective, whatever we do!" laughed Sadie. She leaned towards him with an unlit cigarette in her mouth. "Give me a match; I can just smoke one Turkish, and then I must be off; it's close on twelve o'clock."

"The hour when nothing ends and something begins!" Wymondham struck a wax vesta and laid it to the tip of her cigarette. Soon she was veiled in wreaths of pale smoke.

He sipped his coffee discontentedly. "I hate coffee and cigarettes. They are to us the symbols of parting. We sup . . . I hail you a taxi—you drive home. . . . I am left on the kerbstone—*voilà tout!* It's the overture to an opera—an opera that has never yet been sung; the overture is charming—but I've heard it again—and again—and again!—and I begin to tire of it!"

"There's no opera so beautiful as the one that remains unsung," quoth Sadie sententiously. She flung down her half-smoked Abdulla. "Go down and see that I get a taxi, whilst I put on my cloak, will you?"

Obediently he descended. Sadie beckoned to Jean Polignac.

"Did you notice Mr. Wymondham speaking to a gentleman before I came?"

"*Mais oui*, Madame; a young gentleman with fair hair and very red cheeks. They talked for perhaps twenty minutes and then the young gentleman went."

Sadie pondered on this information. What device could Vicomte have possibly used to rid himself of the superfluous guest? Discourteous she knew he never would be!

. . . She smiled on him very sweetly when he met her at the foot of the stairs; he had bested her—and bested her in silence! What will a woman not give to a man who has mastered that secret?

CHAPTER XIX

GREEN LIMELIGHT

. . . THE Demon of the Pantomime stretched himself and sneezed.

"I'm tired of hanging about in draughts," he grumbled to the Stage-Manager; "surely it's about time I put in an appearance."

"You needn't be peevish," snapped the harassed Stage-Manager, giving the signal for green limelight. "Is that trap-door working?—very well, then"—he beckoned to the impatient Demon. "Come along—and remember, your cue is 'money'!"

. . . . . .

Love has been called upon to bear many burdens, fight many battles, survive many trials, but surely the hardest of these is a prolonged engagement without any definite end in sight.

Certain natures can stand this test better than others; the phlegmatic Briton will gladly wait four or five years for the object of his attentions, seeing her at regular intervals, indulging in what is known—for want of a better word—as a little mild spooning, and finally, when a stroke of luck raises his salary to matrimonial proportions, will call upon his patient Rachael with a cheery: "Now, little woman, we shall be able to fix it up at last, so get ready your fal-lals", etc. . . .

There is no doubt that Jacob must have had a streak of Anglo-Saxon blood in his veins.

Nan, however, in spite of her Hebrew descent, had little in common with Laban's son-in-law, while as for Tony——

Their love was no evergreen, but a rose, a dawn-blown, crimson rose, with heart so deep in hue that the colour passed through flame and dusky purple till it touched black—a glowing, velvety black. . . .

But the rose required tender handling; to be placed in water, the stem clipped.

The rose was no evergreen; it might wither!

A long engagement is perhaps in accordance with the laws of civilization—matrimony demands a certain income to sustain it, and there is no lawful way to Heart's Desire save through matrimony—but it is against the laws of Nature. And Nature has a nasty little way of bursting her bonds (red tape is, after all, not very strong material) and cropping up when least expected.

Towards the middle of December, about three weeks after Tony's memorable return from Boulogne, the Hartmann's left for Bournemouth. Tony would run down every Saturday afternoon and leave on Sunday evening. During the week he went to the City at nine a.m. sharp and returned home at seven p.m.

He wanted Nan badly when he returned home; ached for her; cried aloud for her; spent himself in futile rage at her enforced absence.

He saw a great deal of Vicomte during this period.

And the Other Woman, to whom he had never definitely announced his engagement: "I hate scenes!" —the Other Woman wrote him letters asking why he never came any more.

The Other Woman owned a comfortable income and a pretty little flat. She was no seductive Calypso, but she knew the ways of man, and how to arrange her hair. Tony was free to walk in whenever it pleased him. Matters were thus made easy for his ease-loving person.

Of course he never did walk in; was he not engaged to Nan?

Love-making in a hydro had its difficulties. There was not always an empty room at the disposal of Nan and Tony; she could not take him to her bedroom. When they did find a vacant corner they were as likely as not to be disturbed. The consciousness of a door that might at any moment open was in itself sufficient to rob the perfect moment of its supreme ecstasy.

"In our Cottage by the Sea," Nan once declared desperately, "we'll have a room built without doors at all—and without windows; we can let ourselves down through a trapdoor in the ceiling."

To be sure, the out-of-door world lay ever to hand, but this was December, in England, the time for fires and shaded lights and books, and all the warm, cosy intimacy of home.

The rooms of a hydro are vast and rather chilly, and the furniture belongs emphatically to anybody and everybody. Nan was a picture without a frame, a jewel without a setting.

During the week she had a great deal of time to think about love, and Tony, and herself, and all three. Love does not bear thinking about—it just is!

They still had their wonderful hours, when the barriers were down, and their natures flooded out one to the other, leaping like cascades in the sunlight, revelling in the splendour of Togetherness. But these hours only made them more tensely resolved to keep their happiness at any cost; more fearful of the chasm of black loneliness yawning at their feet, should—anything—occur to separate them before the final consummation.

And the final consummation was not even in sight. Day followed day and brought it no nearer.

Tony had two pounds a week of his own and earned, in addition, two guineas a week.

They could not marry on that.

. . . Money! The Demon chuckled as he flashed his green rays about the stage.

. . . . .

New Year's Eve—and twenty minutes to twelve. In the ballroom of the hydro dancing was in full swing, the company growing rowdier, and rowdier yet, in order to drown that strange fear which attacks even the least sensitive as midnight of December 31st draws reluctantly nearer.

Nan and Tony had stolen away from the crowd, and found on the third floor an empty bedroom with a balcony attached. They stood leaning against the rails, glad of the stillness that seemed to lay a cool hand on their heads after the heat and the din and the atmosphere of jarring voices, two-steps, and cheap champagne, which reigned downstairs.

"We'll see the New Year in from here, you and I," decreed Tony.

The promenade below stretched east and west as far as the eye could see, its hard, black lines unbroken save for the pale yellow blur of light at regular intervals. Beyond the sea lapped the stones monotonously; like a luminous caterpillar, the pier crept far out into the duskily shining water. . . .

Nan shivered in her evening dress; Tony darted into the room behind them and emerged with a crimson satin bed-quilt which he wrapped tightly around her.

"You mustn't catch cold, Girl darling."

A sudden emotion gripped her; how she gloried in being looked after, in the tender, protective note in his voice. She felt she understood the women of old who were contented to be a man's chattel, one of his possessions!

New Year's Eve is the time when King Platitude

comes into his own! He now laid his finger on Nan's arm and she obeyed the call.

"Next year this time."

"I'm not going to wait till then," muttered Tony rebelliously.

"Does Baby-boy want his toy now, this very minute!" she teased him softly.

"Yes! The toy might get broken, or somebody else might buy it, or—or——"

"Or you might stop wanting it!"

"I shall *always* want it!"—fiercely; almost more fiercely than the occasion warranted.

. . . The silence about them deepened—or was it only fancy? . . . A breathless pause hung in the air.

The first stroke of twelve boomed harshly; a response seemed to quiver up from the waiting houses; the tension relaxed. Muffled cheering rose from below, the clapping of hands, a hubbub of voices, and snatches of "Auld Lang Syne".

. . . Tony bent over Nan's hands and kissed them.

"I shall always want it," he repeated solemnly as if taking a vow.

She caught a glimpse of Tony's mind. It was saying: "The occasion demands something of this sort—you must rise to the occasion!"—then it clapped him on the back approvingly as he bowed his head over her hands!

She knew she ought not to be seeing this; she ought also to rise to the occasion, to fit into the picture. Instead of which she battled with a frantic desire to laugh.

"We had better go down now. Uncle won't like it if I'm not there while the kissing is going on."

"Bother uncle! Can't I do all that's wanted in that line?" rejoined Tony, who had abandoned his allegiance

to the gods of convention directly they held him no more by their newness. "I'm sick of having you only by fits and starts; why shouldn't we be married to-morrow?"—impulsively. "Surely we can live on four pounds a week?—thousands of people have started on less."

"I know, but——" Nan stopped, words chasing themselves so fast through her brain that the task of explaining her point of view became Herculean.

Thousands had done it, yes, but not brought up as she had been brought up; she had not the faintest knowledge of cooking, sewing or housekeeping in any shape or form, and the years spent at the Academy and in boarding-houses assisted her not a whit.

"See here," whispered the Thirteenth Fairy, holding up a mirror. Nan saw herself in shabby clothes, tired and dispirited, struggling to light the fire in a dingy living-room, while Tony, equally tired and dispirited, trudged home from the work he loathed, and demanded his dinner! . . .

. . . "You're the last girl in the world to marry a poor man," growled Uncle James in her ear. . . .

No, it couldn't be done; with some men, perhaps—not with Tony. It would be difficult to hold his love at any time; well-nigh impossible in Grub Street.

No, Romance had been good to her—she would not kill Romance.

"No, Boy!"

He mistook her hesitation. "We needn't have any children."

Nan was accustomed by now to these startling inroads on shrines that she had always kept carefully veiled. Tony objected strongly to the existence of unshared shrines.

"I should hate to have a child unless I could give it the best of everything: dainty clothes; large, light

rooms, nice nurses, good teachers later on——" she broke off.

"The Other Man paid me a visit on Thursday,"—inconsequently.

Tony was quite accustomed to the presence of the Other Man in the background. He regarded his unfortunate rival with serene amusement, and to Nan's great disappointment, steadfastly refused to show the most minute signs of jealousy. He even suggested from time to time that Nan would do well to "Shunt me, and leave yourself free for him!"

He made the suggestion now: "He's awfully devoted to you, Girl! And then you could dwell in marble halls, and throw me your chicken drumsticks out of the window. I'd think seriously about it before refusing such a wealthy suitor."

"Money is such a nuisance," sighed Nan. "How did Paris and Helen, Romeo and Juliet, Paolo and Francesca, all the eloping couples of legend, how did they propose to live without it? Shakespeare doesn't tell us!—and it's so important."

"Romeo might have borrowed the railway fare from a pal," suggested the Boy, who had been led by Nan to the twin lakes of Prose and Poetry and almost drowned himself in his eagerness to drink. (Tony as a child could never be sent to a party without *over*-eating himself.)

"But afterwards?"

"Paris enlisted, didn't he?"

"And the others?"

"They slept under the stars, and didn't need to eat, because they were in love. Like me. I don't eat much lately."

"Don't you, Boy?"—with an anxious look. "Why not?"

"I've told you—I'm in love! You'll be asking next with whom?"

"Why aren't you eating well?"—sternly.

"Oh, I dunno. Not enough fresh air. That beastly office."

"Do you still hate it so much?"

"Yes."

Nan was silent. Before their engagement she would have met his unspoken appeal with a rush of sympathy, bade him pour out all his troubles to her, joined him in railing hotly against—well, against whatever was handy.

Now it was more difficult; she was pledged to him, their destinies interwoven; if he did not work steadily——

It was no use encouraging him in rebellion.

And yet——

A little sigh escaped her. The New Year did not promise to be cloudless.

But Tony's arms were crushing her fiercely, and Tony was whirling her away on an incoherent torrent of words.

. . . She was not to sigh—he was there to look after her—he would always be there—they could leave the whole stupid pack of worries behind them—escape to the Orkney Islands—live with the simple fisher-folk—in sou'-westers—watch the storms and the sunrise and the glittering loads of mackerel—go out in the trawlers on still, hot nights. . . .

Nan abandoned herself to the wild rush of fancies; and to the joy of the moment.

. . . . .

January trudged by, chill and sullen.

Tony went to the office at a quarter-past nine, and left, when possible, at a few minutes before seven.

Enter then February, lit by stray gleams of sunshine,

that came and went at the fitful bidding of the east wind.

Tony took to going to the office at quaint, whimsical hours invented by himself, and leaving whenever the spring called him.

The grey-faced, hopeless army that is daily sucked from all sides into the maw of the City, depressed him unutterably. He met them hurrying for their trains, hurrying for their meals, always hurrying and seemingly never reaching anywhere.

And the days were endless, cooped up in a dreary, ill-ventilated room, deafened by the clatter of typewriters, sick from the smell of ink for ever in his nostrils.

He had been promised a good post in the engineering department directly he had thoroughly mastered the drudgery and routine of office-work.

So he sat at a desk and glowered about him. Occasionally he made use of the firm's notepaper on which to write letters to Nan; occasionally, too, he scribbled verses. Thoreau's *Walden* lay beneath his ledgers (for reference, no doubt). Omar lay snugly in his coat-pocket; he imagined himself the discoverer of the Rubáiyát, like all young folks reading it for the first time.

It never occurred to him to do any work of his own accord, and he waxed mightily indignant when requested to do so; surely it was enough that they had got him? He looked on his superiors as malignant magicians who had wantonly made captive his soul. Not knowing this, they regarded him with a certain amount of disfavour.

"Slack!" was the verdict pronounced by the Chief of his department to the General Manager.

Tony pitied his fellow-clerks intensely; they were already lifeless automatons, stamped by the great machine that requires only one pattern and ruthlessly moulds to that pattern all who venture near enough

to be clutched by its wheels. And then one day it flashed upon him: "I'll grow like that in time!" and a great loathing rushed in hot waves from head to foot.

His back ached. He had been writing all the morning. And then someone opened the grimy square of window; a stray little puff of air, warm with sunshine, fragrant with a hint of primroses, stole over the ledge and rioted just beneath Tony's nose. . . . Somewhere out there in the country spring was beginning to be felt.

What was he doing here?—he!—Pierrot, Romany, Moon-lover! What in God's name was he doing here?

And the answer was: Nan!

A stifled resentment stirred within him as he once more took up his pen. . . .

. . . . . .

That same afternoon, Nan, strolling along the pier, found herself face to face with one of the most woebegone problems humanity can offer: a small boy, five years old at the most, hopelessly lost. He looked at Nan; she looked back at his grubby, scraped knees, at his mop of auburn hair, at the quivering mouth whose curves were those of a Botticelli angel—and something went out from her with a great leap.

Sonny instinctively recognized a friend; he clutched at her skirts with feverish fingers.

"I want my mummy"—imperiously. "Find her!"

"You *dear* little chap!" She took the proffered hand, and obediently sallied forth on the quest of an erring mummy.

The sixth time they paced the length between the toll-gates and the band, Nan became aware of a black and distracted figure hanging over the side of the pier—gazing wildly into the depths of the sea below.

"Are you looking for your little boy?"

Sonny's mother overwhelmed her offspring with kisses, and Nan with gratitude.

"Thank the kind lady for looking after you, Sonny."

Sonny had no intention of doing so. Mummy was found—that was sufficient for him. With a seraphic smile he let himself be borne off.

Nan turned away, something dragging at her heart-strings. He had singled her out from the crowd, true—but she did not count when "Mummy" appeared on the scene.

"Mummy." . . .

. . . And Tony had said they were to have no children.

Vaguely she felt that she was being robbed of her rights—her rights. . . .

Thus it befell that when they met on the following Saturday a certain defiance lurked in both their eyes.

CHAPTER XX

SILK STOCKINGS—

THE CROWN THEATRE, BOURNEMOUTH.

WEEK ENDING FEBRUARY 26TH.

THE ETERNAL TRIANGLE.

BY JAMES HEARN.

FRESH FROM AN UNPRECEDENTED LONDON SUCCESS!
MISS CUCKOO SOMERS AND MR. NEVILLE BEAUMONT
IN THEIR ORIGINAL PARTS. . . .

EVERYWHERE the enormous posters challenged the eye. Nan, visiting Cuckoo at her hotel, found her installed in a luxurious bed-sitting-room.

"Hello, Cuckoo!"

"Hello, Nan!"

Miss Cuckoo Somers lay in bed; it gave Nan a thrill of satisfaction to note that there were still red-thread laundry embroideries on the torn lace of her friend's nightgown—but now the lace was real and costly.

A bright fire burned in the grate; flowers in profusion lay tossed about, in corners, on tables, everywhere; a pair of rose-coloured stockings wriggled silkily in the middle of the carpet.

"Sit down, Nan!—oh, are all the chairs full? Never mind, sweep those things on to the floor!" She indicated a heterogeneous pile of feathers, underwear, and roses. "Excuse me getting up—awfully late last night"; a slight drawl replaced the American accent she had formerly affected.

Nan congratulated her on her recent successes.

"And what have you been doing?" queried Cuckoo, lazily munching *marrons glacés*.

"I? Oh, I've—I'm engaged!"

"Speaking part?"

"No, a man."

"Oh! Who is it?"

"Do you remember," Nan started lengthily, "that supper party we gave at the Studio towards the end of our last term?"

"Yes, I remember; just before you made that awful hash of Rosalind."

Nan winced and resumed her narrative.

"Johnny came in, and——"

"Don't tell me"—Cuckoo sat bolt upright in bed, her drawl totally forgotten—"Don't tell me that you're engaged to Johnny June!"

"Good Lord, no! One doesn't get engaged to Johnny, one only tells him all about it! No, but he brought a friend along with him that evening, and—and——"

Cuckoo laughed outright. "Charming embarrassment!" she said. "Nan, you are positively Early Victorian! Is *he* your mash? I've got vague memories of rumpled hair and a smile!"

Nan informed her of the sequence of events.

"And they lived happy ever after!" yawned Cuckoo, cutting her short in the middle. "How old are you, Nan?—twenty-one?—hm! You're not vaccinated yet!"

"What *do* you mean?"

"'For ever', on a man's lips—pouf!" Cuckoo snapped her fingers. "When you've learned that lesson, you're vaccinated, and proof against any disease; till then, Heaven help you! Well, well, keep your ideals; he is your ideal, I suppose!"

"No," said Nan bluntly, "I've never met my ideal; I want—I want the face of one and the brains of another; the way one man opens the door, and the crease in another's trousers; and charming manners, and small ears, and a voice with a lilt in it—all put together! . . . Then I'll stand my Perfect Man on the hearthrug, wind him up—and find he won't go," she finished with a laugh.

"I'm going to get dressed," announced Cuckoo. "Ring for the maid, Nan—or stay, *you* shall maid me this morning, and then we can go on talking." She thrust five pink toes from under the quilt.

"B-r-r-r!"—shivering. "Poke the fire—use a slipper if there's no poker!"

The warm flames reflected themselves on the satin whiteness of her skin.

Nan smiled.

"What's the joke?" demanded the other. "Chuck me my stockings, Nan. No-o-o! Not rose-colour in the morning, you donkey!—in the second drawer—bronze!"

These were silk also.

"What were you smiling at just now?"

"I was thinking of Connie Rosenfelt. 'Would you like your husband to see you with your chemise in holes?'—and your answer: 'What matter, if the skin's white enough underneath?'"

"Poor Connie, how we shocked her that night!—What's she doing?"

"Oh, nothing! She never did do anything! A bath, Cuckoo?"

"I've had it, my dear," said Cuckoo, clothing herself Venus-like in a foaming froth of fine lace. "Those are my corsets—there, Nan! I always slip out of bed at about seven and have a dip, and they bring my chocolate up at half-past eight."

She took from the cupboard a pale pink satin dressing-gown, a luxurious garment embroidered with sprays of mauve wistaria and, slipping into it, peremptorily bade Nan brush her short fair hair.

Nan obeyed, fascinated. The voluptuous atmosphere of the room enervated her; the dormant womanhood stirred, made known its first, barely-conscious, demands.

"Do you always wear silk stockings, Cuckoo, even for every day? I had a pair once for best, spun silk, but——"

"Good Heavens, child, what do you expect me to wear? White woollen ones? I should have thought your boy would have taught you better by now." She rummaged through the drawers of the bureau, turning everything on to the ground as she did so. "Here, would you like these? Take 'em! I had a dozen pairs given me only yesterday. They're silk all the way up."

Nan accepted the gift with secret delight and outward protestations, but Cuckoo cut her short with a shower of violet-scented hair-oil, which, missing its mark, passed over the shock of fair curls into Nan's mouth.

"Have you got a comb?" asked the latter, as soon as she was able to speak.

Cuckoo searched the dressing-table in vain; everything was there except a comb; silver, cut-glass in profusion, bottles of scent, a lace handkerchief without a centre for use, powder, rouge, golden curls, a diamond ornament entangled in a fleecy white powder-puff, billets-doux, and the latest cream for blanching the skin—"used by all the Crowned Heads of Europe!"

Cuckoo's toilet-table was the expression of her soul.

"Blow! Ah, here it is!" she triumphantly produced a common horn comb in which remained three solitary prongs at wide distances apart. "Will it do?"

This was too much for Nan; she sat on the floor and laughed until she cried.

"Have you gone off your head?" demanded Cuckoo.

"No," gurgled Nan between her spasms. "But the silver and the scent and the diamonds—and then that comb—that poor, pathetic, worthless old comb! Cuckoo, you're rich!"

"I'm not! I wish I was! I——"

The door opened sharply; a sleek, cropped head and an immaculate pair of boots made a confident entry. "I say——" then stopped short.

"Run away, Bertie!" quoth Cuckoo carelessly. "Can't you see I've got company?"

And the door was obediently closed.

"He's such a——" began Cuckoo; then she caught sight of Nan's face: "Well, what's the matter with you?"

"Cuckoo! ! !" gasped Nan; "he came into your bedroom, and without knocking!"

"That's *my* mash! You haven't got a monopoly of 'em!"

"But—but——"

Cuckoo wheeled round on her chair, half amused, half impatient. "I'm not a saint on a pedestal, my dear! What's the good of a pedestal, anyway? A man sticks you up on it, does his level best to tumble you off—and then reproaches you if he succeeds! . . . The sooner you see things as they are, Nan Hartmann, the better for you." . . .

. . . . .

Nan, in petticoat and corsets, stood in her room at the Seaview Hydro, gazing disconsolately at her dressing-table; there were two ivory brushes, a photograph of Tony in a silver frame, a tiny bottle of white-rose scent, a pincushion, a vase, and a string of pink corals.

From her hands dangled a pair of cobwebby black silk stockings; they were not in their right setting. Nan realized that!

Slowly she seated herself on the bed and stripped off the one-and-eleven-three cashmere hose. Slowly she drew over her limbs the dainty, shimmering webs presented her by Cuckoo; then she stood up and surveyed herself in the pier-glass.

The effect was startling; seductive, shining curves met her eyes where formerly had reigned two shapeless props. As she gazed and gazed, the turbulent longings which had that morning taken root in her, sprang into life once more. She *must* have scents and creams and dainty underwear, all the weapons with which her sex were wont to equip themselves for the great contest; she must and she would have them!

But how?

Her worldly possessions were four shillings; she received half a crown a week pocket-money.

For the next few days she sought desperately for a means whereby to satisfy her newly-born desires. Then Fate sent a messenger in the shape of a peaky-faced

child distributing leaflets in the High Street. One of these was thrust into Nan's hand; it ran as follows:

MRS. POTTER GREEN
Wardrobe Dealer.
Old clothes! Old silver! Old Teeth!
Best prices given.
Call by appointment. 141 Avenue Lane.

Nan stood considering, the card in her hand, mischief rampant in her breast.

Mr. and Mrs. Hartmann were out; Nan was in earnest conclave with the page-boy.

"Jossett, I'm expecting a visitor this afternoon."

"A visitor? Yes, miss."

"You—er—needn't mention it to my people, Jossett."

Jossett winked; had he been in a position to do so, he would surely have dug her in the ribs.

"Yes, miss. Mum's the word! Shall I show him up to the drawing-room?"

"No, straight to my bedroom!"

Jossett looked startled.

"And it's not a 'him' it's a—a lady, Jossett!"

Jossett looked disappointed. "Yes, miss."

Nan had spread all her available garments on the bed—all her garments, in fact, with the exception of a blue serge costume, a best dress, and a rather shabby white evening-gown; these she reserved for use. The array looked really quite presentable, arranged to show its best points and with all rents and stains carefully hidden from view. For years she had been accumulating clothes; Mrs. Hartmann objected to anything being thrown away, and the idea of selling any part of their wardrobe had never occurred to them. . . .

A step on the stairs. With a sudden inspiration Nan

darted to the window and lowered the blind. A knock; Jossett, disapproval written large over his mobile face, ushered in a wizened little dame of meek aspect; he then withdrew.

"Good afternoon," said Nan; doubtfully she extended one hand—then, seeing Mrs. Potter Green made no sign, withdrew it; by this time Mrs. Potter Green had her hand forward; slight confusion ensued.

"Cold dye!" said the "lady" affably.

Nan froze; then, remembering her pressing needs, thawed again. "Yes, very."

They regarded each other lamely.

"These are the things!" Nan indicated the bed; then: "How much will you give for them?"

"It might be better if I caught sight of 'em first. Would you mind pullin' up the blind?"

Nan hesitated.

"If no one ain't dead, that's to say!" added Mrs. Potter Green cheerfully.

A stream of light flooded the room.

In deathly silence then did Mrs. Potter Green inspect the garments. One by one she picked them up and shook them out, testing the material between her finger and thumb, pouncing with unerring instinct upon every spot, every worn place, and muttering at intervals: "Ah, what a pity—no style!"

Nan looked on, hope dying a lingering death within her. How she wished, confronted by this stern critic, that she possessed "style".

At last: "'Ow much do you want for 'em?"

"Ten pounds!"—in an off-hand manner.

Mrs. Potter Green made no reply. She folded the clothes and laid them neatly back on the bed. Nan watched her, fascinated. Not till the good dame, bag in hand, was actually at the door, did she find speech to recall her: "Please, oh, please——"

Mrs. Potter Green paused. "I take it you was only jokin'?"

Then a battle royal ensued, which resulted in Nan being left, weary and broken, but with an unholy sense of joy, clutching nine and a half golden sovereigns between her fingers. In addition to her clothing she had been forced to part with a heavy eighteen-carat chain-bracelet and a small diamond locket.

No matter. On the following week she was going up to London to pay a long-promised visit to Sadie. Boy should see then that she had learned her lesson, the Art of being a Woman!

CHAPTER XXI

—AND THE RESULT THEREOF

"I SHOULD like you to make a point of being present," said the Vicomte.

Andrew looked flattered. "Of course! Of course!" he replied. "Only too pleased if my poor criticisms can be of any use to you."

He had taken a great fancy to Wymondham; the latter almost daily made his way to Streatham Hill, and always met with a warm welcome. They sat round the fire now, while the two men talked, and Sadie, her dancing amber eyes fixed on the flames, sat curled up in a big armchair and threw in soft-voiced comments from time to time; she made one now.

"I really don't see why I'm not invited; I love private theatricals!"

"Isn't the title of the play enough for you?" laughed Vicomte—"*For Husbands Only!* It represents a little

whim of mine; you must humour me. Andrew will tell you all about it when he comes home."

"Yes, yes!" said the last-named fussily. "Can't you understand, my dear, that there are times when men want to be alone—amongst themselves, so to speak? I shall be delighted to be present at your play, Wymondham; at your own house, did you say?—and when?"

"I've fixed it for the eighth of March—a fortnight from to-day."

Sadie regarded Vicomte musingly from out of the corner of her eye; what fresh devilment was working in his brain? Curiously enough, she had forgotten the episode of the broken wine-glass at "Le Château en Espagne".

He smiled at her. "She doesn't like being left out, does she? Is nobody making a fuss of her, then?" Gently he stroked the little white hand that rested on the arm of the chair.

Andrew regarded them with a benign smile. "You'll have a cigar, Wymondham? They're upstairs; I'll go and fetch them."

"Mind you knock or cough or something when you come back," murmured Wymondham lazily. "I might be kissing your wife, and I shouldn't like you to catch us at the critical moment."

"Ha, ha!" laughed Andrew, who always saw a joke; and departed chuckling at the idea.

. . . As his footsteps died away, Vicomte rose deliberately, shaking off the mask of apathy which had lain on him till now. Coming up behind Sadie's chair, he put both his arms under her chin, pulling her head backwards.

"*Je t'adore*, Marquise!" he whispered, kissing her fiercely yet gently. . . .

She laughed softly up in his face. . . .

"Vicomte, Vicomte, behave yourself!"

"Not I! A woman is never so disappointed as when she orders a man to behave, and he—obeys!" and he kissed her again.

—A loud and facetious cough outside the door; the rapping of knuckles against the panels; Andrew was keeping up the joke, as expected of him.

"Wait one minute!" Vicomte tiptoed exaggeratedly back to his chair. "Now you may come in!"

Andrew entered, still chuckling. "Well, did I make enough noise?" he queried.

"Quite enough, thank you!" said Vicomte gravely.

Nan thrust her head out between the window-curtains.

"Hello!" she cried.

"Why, little Nan!" She was rather a favourite with Andrew. "Have you been there all the time?" . . .

"I suppose so"—tumbling off the window-seat and joining the group at the fire. "To own the truth," she continued, rubbing her eyes, "I'm frightfully ashamed of myself, but I must have been asleep; the room was empty when I came in and curled myself up with a book. I heard you cough, Andrew! You ought to take something for it!"

Vicomte glanced over at Sadie; she was still gazing into the fire.

Andrew woggled at Nan a plump and playful finger.

"A-a-ah! Somebody wants bright eyes for to-night! Somebody is coming to dinner! Somebody will go up to the library afterwards! Somebody will——"

"If you mean," interrupted Nan calmly, "that Tony is coming, and that he will probably make love to me, why not say so? You'll cough outside the library door, won't you, Andrew?"

"I must be going," Wymondham struck in. "Good-bye, Sadie—if you can spare me a look? Good-bye, Nan!"

Andrew offered to accompany him as far as the taxi-rank. The hall door closed behind them.

"Nan, were you really asleep?"

Nan looked troubled. "Yes and no," she admitted. "I woke up when the door banged; somebody must have left the room."

"Yes," asked Sadie, "and then?"

"Sadie!" Nan burst out. "You—you know!"

Sadie poked the fire.

"Shocked?"—quizzically.

"N-no—only I thought one only read about those things—about married women—and all that! I didn't know somehow that anyone one knew did!"

"Your speech is rather involved, dear. Never mind; I see your point. But there's nothing to look troubled about; we amuse each other, that's all!"

"Yes. Of course." Nan's straight black brows were still drawn together in a frown.

Sadie sprang to her feet. "Time to dress for dinner! . . . It's all right, little Nan, we are both too skilful with the foils ever to hurt each other—or anyone else; besides, we fence with the buttons on, and masks. One can't touch realities that way, you know."

She left the room, humming a little French song.

Nan followed slowly.

. . . "*Je t'adore,* Marquise!"—it had not sounded somehow as if Vicomte were *only* amusing himself—but still——

But still, she could not spare the time now to work out Sadie's problems. . . .

Arriving in London that morning, Nan had spent some delicious hours shopping in the West End, buying nothing of the slightest practical use, everything that was soft and dainty and luxurious. Her nine and a half sovereigns were gone—but upstairs on the bed lay a complete set of delicate embroidered underwear;

a Japanese silk kimono, corn-coloured, worked with scarlet poppies; also, crowning glory, a new evening dress, blue-grey, the dull tint of a pigeon's egg; shoes and stockings to match had also been procured, and a wrought silver girdle. The last sovereign she laid out in the perfumery department; scent, powder, cream, even a little pot of rouge and a stick of carmine for the lips.

. . . She entered her room and shut the door behind her. The great moment had arrived!

. . . . .

Nan surveyed herself in the long cheval-glass, and felt that life was good. . . .

It was not so much the consciousness of being well-dressed—that had been hers often in the days of affluence at Camden Hill—but she had contrived to invest herself with that nameless, half seductive, wholly alluring charm which causes other women to raise their brows doubtfully, and brings a curious glitter to the eyes of men.

The dress hung to the ground in long shimmering lines, unbroken save for here and there a dusky shadow. As she moved, a slit at the side revealed glimpses of silk-clad ankle and satin shoe; under her arms the silver girdle; round her head a silver band. She looked Eastern, mysterious, a queen of Sphinx and Pyramid and slowly creeping Nile.

Her hair had been a problem, it was black and heavy and straight—oh, so hopelessly straight; an inspiration caused her to part it down the centre, and twisting two long plaits, she curled them round and round her ears. A faint perfume hung about dress, arms and hair. Her lips were red, too red for the olive pallor of her face, and her eyes gleamed blue, blue, under the straight black brows.

The unwonted, light, slippery feel of the silken underwear against the skin was having a curious effect upon her mind, feeding it with thoughts hitherto silent, whispering her how to hold herself, how to look, when to speak, when to be silent; telling her of men, and how they can best be made to dance to a woman's caprice. . . .

Nobody but herself would know of this concealed splendour, but it had the greatest share of all towards the creation of a new Nan.

. . . Slowly she descended to the dining-room, turned the handle of the door.

Sadie and Andrew had not yet appeared. Tony was leaning against the mantelpiece, waiting impatiently. Where the deuce was Nan?—he wanted to hold her on his lap, to tease her, shock her, bring that quick, shy look of adoration to her eyes! After all, it was nice to have a little girl of one's own, even though——

Something made him turn his head. He drew in his breath sharply. Nan was standing in the doorway, looking at him. Was it Nan?

"By George! ! !"

She favoured him with a mocking little smile; then Sadie entered; she, too, looked astonished at the metamorphosis, but tactfully refrained from comment.

Not so Andrew.

Andrew made up for any lack of appreciation on his wife's part by loudly-voiced tributes of surprise and admiration.

"Look at her, Sadie! Did you ever see such a change? What has she done to herself? And a new frock, too!—Naughty little Nan, where did she get the money for a new frock?—and shoes and stockings to match, if you please! Well, well, somebody is a lucky dog to-night! What do you think of her, Tony? If I weren't a married man"—waggishly; Sadie kicked him under the table.

"I didn't mean it, dear,"—dropping his fork and patting her unwilling hand; then triumphantly: "I've made her jealous, 'pon my word, I've made my wife jealous."

In this wise did Andrew disport himself gaily through five courses and the dessert. He discovered Nan had reddened her lips and lectured her on the folly thereof. . . .

But Nan, usually so sensitive, to-night heeded him not a whit. She read aright the message in Tony's gaze, and the words of a song flashed through her mind —a song she had once heard sung by Yvette Guilbert:

> Vous n'êtes que de naïfs mâles,
> Je suis l'Eternel Féminin!

She had never quite understood that song till now.

"By-the-bye, Sadie, mother is away over Thursday and Friday; may I put up here? It's so beastly to come home and find the fire out."

"My dear boy, Nan occupies the spare room until Saturday; unless you are content with a shakedown in the garret, I don't quite know where to put you!"

"That'll do me fine, thanks; I have a special weakness for garrets."

After dinner, according to programme, Nan was ostentatiously dispatched to the library, to look up "radium" in the encyclopædia; Tony, equally ostentatiously, was commanded to follow her with matches. To be sure, electric light was laid on through the house —but Andrew prided himself on being a perfect chaperon.

Leaning against the bookcase, the dark tomes throwing into strong relief the gleaming lines of her figure, she waited for Tony to make the first move. With a quick attempt to establish the old ascendancy, to regain his former footing, he seated himself in the leathern armchair and invited her to come and kiss him.

Nan merely looked!

Whereat Tony threw a coaxing note into his voice.

"If I were a man," said Nan at last, slowly and deliberately, "and wanted a kiss, I should—take it!"

Tony strode across the room; again and again his lips sought hers, without, however, winning the slightest response.

"If I were a man," quoth Nan again, "I should make a woman kiss me! I should make her want to!"

"I don't care one way or another." Tony walked back to his seat, keeping his head carefully turned away from the vision at the bookcase.

. . . "Boy!"

No reply.

"Boy, would you like me to kiss you?"

Still no reply.

"Boy, if you come to me, I will!"

He came. Of course he came. She sighed wearily: "I would have respected you so much more if you had not come!"

Tony felt inclined to shake her, which, as the silk underclothing had whispered to its wearer, was the proper frame of mind to which to reduce a man.

Had it been the old Nan, he most certainly would have shaken her—but this maiden who looked at him with such mocking eyes, who was she? And how was he to understand in what way the change had been wrought? He courted her as ardently as he had courted her on their first meeting.

And the old, old platitude came home to Nan—how often had she not heard and disbelieved it!—that it is the outward, not the inward woman that is worshipped by the Male. Well, she had given him of her soul; to-night she gave him a new frock and a satin shoe—and he had straightway succumbed.

It is always something of a shock when a platitude is actually realized; so few people pause to think that wise sayings merely degenerate into platitudes because they are so true, so oft-recurring.

Suddenly Nan abandoned her attitude of calm superiority; she showed herself instead seductive, yielding. . . .

Up to now, she had always received Tony's caresses more or less passively, wondering the while what she ought to be doing?—what he expected of her? There must be a thousand subtle arts and cajoleries she could practise if only she knew of them.

. . . But to-night they came of themselves, without effort.

And yet, from this fiercer wooing, the old companionship departed. Sex sprang between them, bringing in its train that faint antagonism which can never be wholly eradicated.

Again she changed her mood.

"Send me a dream in the flames, Boy. No, not the Cottage by the Sea to-night! I'd be bored to death at the Cottage. Draw up your chair to the fire, and make me cosy, and take me where there are lights and music and people." . . .

"Then we'll go to Paris!" whispered Tony. . . .

"Charing Cross, Girl, on a grey, cheerless morning. A thick fog, because it's London, and we're going away from it! . . . Can you see the stream of cars and four-wheelers rattling and puffing and jolting up the approach? . . . People bustle about the platform . . . The boat-train is panting to be off; belching out great black clouds of smoke. The clatter of trucks! The dull thud of heavy baggage. Doors are banged. . . . A whistle sounds. . . . There is a final chorus of, 'Good-bye! Good-bye! Write when you reach Paris!' a last hurried kiss—and the train slowly——"

"Doesn't move out of the station!" broke in Nan. "It moves two inches and stops dead."

Tony frowned fiercely. "How can I take you to Paradise—Paris, I mean—if you won't let the train go?"

"All right," said Nan meekly. "May we have a compartment to ourselves?"

"Of course we have," said Tony. "Now, listen—

. . . "The lights become rarer, die away. We kneel up on the seat to look out of the window; it's so foggy we can't see anything except the reflection of the lamp and our own faces, racing alongside the carriage. So we settle down with magazines and chocolates. You lean against me and fall asleep——"

"I don't!"—indignantly. "At eleven o'clock in the morning!—why should I? . . . Besides, we are nearly at Dover. You must strap the rugs together. I love to see you looking after me on a journey; you look so sturdy and competent and British!"

Tony went on . . . "Keep close to me up the gangway, Girl! . . . Can you feel the fresh, cold wind blowing on us from a choppy sea?"

"Yes," said Nan, "and I can smell that hot, steamery muddle of smoke and indiarubber, and——"

"I know!" interrupted Tony hastily, "you needn't go on. . . . We are stopping on deck, you and I, to watch the waves race backwards from the steamer! Look, Nan! Look, Girl, there's Calais! We shall land in a quarter of an hour, and hear the porters speaking French!"

"Yes"—dreamily. "So clever of them! . . . And the Continental train standing miles above the platform! You'll have to hoist me up to the carriage. . . . How hot it is inside. . . . What's the time, Boy?"

"Close on two o'clock. The fog has delayed us a bit. I'm dying for some lunch; shall we try and stagger

through to the dining-car? Two steps forward, three back, and a lurch!"

"Yes," assented Nan, sniffing ecstatically. "Now for some decent bread!" . . .

"Boy, I'm getting sleepy! Are we *nearly* there?"

"Not for an hour yet, Kiddie darling. Let me make you comfortable; lean up against my shoulder . . . that's right . . . that's right! . . . And the wheels of the train shall sing to us whatever tune is running in our heads . . . they always do:

> . . . "Wynken, Blynken and Nod one night
> Set sail in a wooden shoe . . .

"I'm drowsy as well." . . .

Boy and Girl were silent for a moment, crouching down in the big dark leather chair, the flames flickering on their rapt young faces. A coal fell noisily out of the grate. Tony roused himself with a start.

"Lights, Girl, wake up! . . . O, the glory of it! The lights of Paris . . . and I'm going to show it to you—I—*je—moi*. . . .

"We are rattling into the Gare du Nord. What a row! What a filthy, ear-splitting, divine row! . . . Stand back against that kiosk whilst I get a taximètre. Girl, we are in Paris! . . . in Paris! . . . What hotel shall I tell him to drive to?"

"The best!" replied Nan promptly.

"Yes, of course! I'm rolling in money—sold up everything I possess for this. The Elysée Palace, then! It's near the Bois and the Rue de la Paix and the Concorde. We'll go there to-morrow, and to Montmartre, and the Louvre, and the Luxembourg, and Versailles and Les Invalides and the Opéra and—Ah, here we are!"

He stopped, out of breath.

. . . "One—two—three—eleven o'clock; no dissipation this first evening—we're dead fagged. Just a

little dinner at Marguéry's, a drive through the Boulevards—and back to the hotel.

. . . "You run up first, while I smoke a last cigarette in the *foyer*. No, I shan't be long—oh, I shan't be long, Girl! . . . You know the room, don't you?—our room!" . . .

Nan was silent. They were swirling along into deep waters. She drew closer to Tony—and waited. His voice took on a richer, fuller note.

. . . "May I come in now, Girl? . . . I've never seen you before with your hair down. You've not begun to undress? Couldn't you manage the hooks? Let me try. . . .

"Girl! Girl! These are only dreams—but we must do it—really do it! And now, while we want to—not when it's too late. . . .

"Why shouldn't we?—after all, why shouldn't we? Run away with me to-night. Now. Let's make the dream come true. What do other people matter, and forms and ceremonies that mean nothing, and an income? Girl, don't you see, we may be missing it, as so many others have done. It will never be so wonderful again, never—even if we wait for 'The Voice that breathed o'er Eden'.

"Aren't you broad-minded enough to defy convention—with me, Girl? . . . And you are so beautiful to-night—so beautiful!" . . .

For a moment Nan wavered, swept along by the impetuous torrent of words. Never before had she seen Tony so savage, so almost primitive—and withal so gentle. . . .

Then—then—

"No, Boy. It looks very wonderful in the flames, but—one doesn't, you know. Not really."

The Thirteenth Fairy smiled.

CHAPTER XXII

THE BALLET OF TIRED QUEENS

TONY cherished an Ideal.

For this, H. G. Wells was partly responsible.

The Ideal took the shape of a golden Utopia, where all men were equal, where Beauty was the sole god; Mammon cast out in the wilderness; where school-teachers should be poets; all forms of labour a sheer joy; the wrappings of superstition lifted from birth and death, so that these might be sought after, not dreaded; finally, marriage should only be tolerated as the consummation of love, and women proudly take their place as comrades, where they had formerly been playthings.

All of which merely meant that Tony believed in Eugenics and Communism and Female Suffrage; but these terms rang hard and cold—his vision was warm and glowing.

Therefore, dwelling in the midst of muddle, snobbery, commerce and ignorance, Tony set to work to materialize his Ideal.

Nan, for instance!

In Nan, he thought to have discovered the perfect mate, spiritually, physically, mentally—only that the swaddling-clothes of tradition still clung closely about her, to hinder free communion of speech. Her recent blossoming into the silken coquette Tony rightly attributed to instinct, not to knowledge.

These swaddling-clothes must be removed.

And on Thursday, the 25th of February, the young gentleman proceeded to remove them—not gently, almost imperceptibly, so that the victim hardly recognized

what was being done to her, but tearing off veil after veil with all the force and vigour of his brutal, intolerant young manhood.

"Don't expect us home till late this evening," he informed his sister, meeting her on the stairs before dinner.

"Oh yes, you're staying here a couple of nights, aren't you?—what a nuisance! I shall have to be domestic and air sheets. Why will you be so late?"

"I'm going to take Nan out—to see Life!"

"With a capital L?—hm' Mind what you're about, Tony; she's curiously ill-informed on some matters."

"I know, and I intend opening her eyes. I've been meaning to do it since a long time. It's absurd; one can't talk to her ten minutes without stumbling up against a closed door. She's clever enough; has read everything—and realized nothing." Tony was well mounted on his hobby-horse. "We can never reach perfection that way. Never. She needn't actually taste of the apple of Good and Evil——"

"Only slip on the peel that others have thrown about!"

Tony looked stubborn. Very few people suspected, under his wayward, Pierrot-like personality, this vein of doggedness, this almost fanatic adherence to any cherished notion. But Sadie had always guessed at it, and argued no more.

"You'd better have the latchkey," she said.

. . . . .

. . . The Ballet of Tired Queens!

For scenery, the junction of five great lit streets; for background, huge grey buildings, crossed and re-crossed by flaming letters of green and crimson and yellow. For orchestration, the shouting of hoarse voices, shrill screams of laughter, the rumble and shattering din of

vehicles. For conductor—say the helmeted man in blue who rules chaos with uplifted arm, from a tiny island amidst the whirlpool. . . .

The Ballet of Tired Queens!

Up and down, to and fro, they pace, a never-ending procession; the hard, white gas-lamps flaring remorselessly on painted lips, on tired, mournful eyes. Up and down they pace, dethroned, their ermine draggled—yet royal still by right of the One Man's Heart they had ruled, perhaps for a day—or for an hour!

. . . The Principal Girl clings to the arm of the Principal Boy: Will the Ballet never be over? Can it not be cut out of the pantomime altogether? Must she look at it?—*must* she? . . .

Up and down, to and fro!—the same faces, or always different?—they look the same. The Stage-Manager has bidden them smile, so one and all they smile! . . .

. . . The Ballet of Tired Queens.

. . . . . .

Vicomte was busy, superintending the drapery of a grey plush curtain, when Tony burst into the room.

"Just look here!" he cried; and: "Hello, what do you think you're doing?"

"This is my latest toy, my Théâtre Polichinelle! Pretty, isn't it?"

Alister Wymondham was the fortunate possessor of a house with a ponderous Early Victorian exterior, and an interior all Watteau, and rose brocade and Louis-Seize furniture, and doors inset with dainty painted medallions.

But in the drawing-room, strange alterations were in progress. The lofty apartment had been divided in two by a heavy fall of pale grey plush depending from silver

cords. Behind this curtain a miniature stage had been erected, white and silver; white pillars, three on each side; and three little white stairs leading down to the audience.

Half a dozen workmen were employed in lumpishly striving to satisfy the imperturbable gentleman who lounged in a brocaded armchair and let fall occasional pearls of wisdom in weary, almost inaudible tones.

"You can go and have lunch now! Is it your lunch-time? Of course. It is always your lunch-time. And I have noticed you growing restive. Be back before five o'clock, if possible. Now then, my son, what's the trouble? Why aren't you working?"

"I am," said Tony. "At the present moment I'm fixing some lamps near Clapham."

"I see! You can attend to my footlights in a moment. What *is* the trouble?—and what do you mean by taking Nan to Romanico's at eleven-thirty last night?"

"You saw us?" Tony bent over the row of tiny electric bulbs which were to be fixed along the foot of the stage. "Are you having it lit only from the front?"

Vicomte ignored the question altogether. "What were you doing with Nan at Romanico's, Tony? I don't approve!"

Tony, in his turn, ignored the question. "I came to show you this"—producing a letter from his pocket.

"May I read it?" Wymondham stretched out his hand for the faintly-scented missive.

"It's *her*!" explained Tony ungrammatically.

"Ah! The Other Woman!" Vicomte ran his eye carelessly down the closely-written pages, while Tony amused himself by jerking the grey curtain up and down by its cord—until he succeeded in breaking it!

"Hm! A box at the Empyrium—supper!—the lady

is persistent!" Vicomte folded the letter and returned it to its owner.

"I don't want to descend to the banality of 'I told you so!' Tony, but. . . ."

"I think I ought to see her," mused Tony, "and make a clean breast of things. After the performance, you know! She—she's got an awfully pretty little flat." . . .

"Prettier than a Bournemouth boarding-house, eh?"

Tony winced and scowled. A friend who knows you well, knows you too well.

"You advise me not to——"

"I don't advise you. Go by all means!"

"I shall tell Nan where I'm going, of course!" Tony added cheerily.

"My—dear—boy! ! !"—in tones of profoundest amazement, "whatever for? Your next suggestion will be to take her with you—a nice little party of three!"

Tony tramped excitedly up and down the room.

"You—you—don't understand! Oh, how I loathe the necessity for constant humbugging and lies! There *is* no necessity! Nan and I aren't like other people. I've told her—things! What can come between us? Nothing! . . . The world is changing, moving. The New Generation. We shall belong to each other, yes, and be free as air. She—she'll understand!"

. . . Vicomte was laughing softly to himself. "Oh, Tony, Tony! Twenty-four years old, and you really believe one woman will 'understand' when the Other Woman is in question?"

"Yes!"—kicking doggedly with his heel at the polished parquet floor—"she will. We're different; I'll show you. I'm not only in love with her—she's my comrade, my chum. Nothing shall be hidden from her. We'll live our lives equally."

"Which accounts, I suppose," put in Vicomte drily, "for Romanico's last night!"

"Don't I want her to tell me everything?"—unheeding the interruption.

"Because you know she has nothing to tell."

"Bah!"

"Listen, Tony." Wymondham crossed the room and stood looking down at the boy, where he squatted on the lowest step leading up to the stage. "Listen, and I'll draw a picture for your edification: It's a castle, with turrets and moats and battlements, and all the necessary paraphernalia. Upstairs in the tower room sits the Ladye of the Castle, clad in spotless white garments. She is winding the distaff of her spinning-wheel; in a corner stands a spinet; near the door a tambour-frame. Forgive me if I mix my periods. Ever and anon she glances through the window, down the winding road which will see her lord return from the pleasures of—well, of the chase!

. . . "At last he comes. He removes his muddy boots; washes his soiled hands; *then* he mounts to the tower room to greet his Ladye!

"The world hasn't changed since then, Tony—in spite of Movements and New Eras and Individual Rights!—The Ladye is still best in the tower room. Take my advice—leave her there!"

"You're wrong!" retorted Tony; "I can show you a better picture than that. It's the winding road below the Castle; the open road—and the Ladye is swinging along beside her man, and the fresh, keen air blows on them both alike! She doesn't care a fig for his muddy boots!"

"*Soit!*"—the other shrugged his shoulders. "Have it your own way, then; tell Nan where you're going to-night—and with whom. Tell her all about it—and see what happens."

"I mean to!"

After which they embarked on an absorbing discussion *re* the advisability of limelights on so small a stage.

Nan was faced with an empty afternoon. Sadie had gone to an "At Home". Tony, of course, never put in an appearance till seven o'clock or thereabouts—where should she go?

Connie had invited her to tea, but then. . . .

Nan wondered idly what her former comrades of the Rouge and Tinsel were doing?—She might look up Philippa Merrick and find out; the latter was in London, Nan had seen her name billed in a small Shakesperian part at the Majestic.

She had always liked Philippa. All of a sudden a wild desire seized her to get once more into touch with that tumultuous portion of her career. Eggs—Mara—Bumps—where were they all? Was that little backwater still dashing itself along in a series of whirlpools and eddies and currents? Still imagining itself the main stream?

Yes! She would decidedly look up Philippa. How pleased they all would be to see her again.

"Hello, Nan! Where do you spring from?"

No dainty rose and silver curtains here. A bare-looking room, table shoved to one side, miscellaneous piles of manuscript, swords, jam and grease-paint, indicated the home of the worker, not the dilettante.

Jerry, good old Jerry, sat astride of the table, conducting a rehearsal. Philippa Merrick stood in queenly lines by the window. On the space cleared for the stage, two figures were gesticulating; a young man with a haggard, intellectual face, and a maiden wearing the sage-green frock and blue beads of the *Patience*

period, and no doubt fondly imagining herself an important disciple of an ultra-modern movement.

"Sit down, Nan; excuse us if we go on with this—it has to be ready by next week—matinée at the Little Hall. If Randolph Trew gets to hear of it and puts it on, it may sound the death-knell of the problem play treated subjectively! We must stand away from things to get a perspective!" His face glowed with enthusiasm. "We," on his lips meant Pioneers, Intellect, the Drama, the Future. . . .

He signed to the sage-green maiden to proceed.

Nan, feeling curiously shy and out of it, leaned up against the door and watched. The play abounded in subtleties so subtle that Bernard Shaw in comparison became the Apostle of the Obvious.

Suddenly the actors came to a halt.

"What's up?" cried Jerry. "Go on!" He gave them their cue: "Just outside where the carts rumble, rumble ever on." . . .

"If Vivien points to the window when she says, 'just outside,' it wrecks the whole sublimity of the metaphor," pronounced the haggard young man. "'Just outside' doesn't mean 'outside', it means 'outside our lives'! But it doesn't if you point; it means 'outside' then"!

"It doesn't," protested Vivien. "And I *must* point there; it's my conception of the character!"

"The Character is subordinate to the Idea," quoth the haggard young man grandiloquently—with a sudden lapse he added: "Anyway, you jolly well can't point, because I'm 'left centre'—it will prevent me crossing to seize the lamp."

"I don't see why it should?"—from Jerry.

"I can't leap over her arm, can I?"—the haggard young man was getting annoyed.

"Surely," calmly suggested Philippa, with her inimitable manner of always standing aloof from anything trivial, "surely she can drop her arm or you can cross from the back?"

"My arm remains outstretched and quivering!" insisted the sage-green maiden; "it is the leitmotif of Magdalen's personality; you must cross by the back!"

"I can't; it means I come up the wrong side of the lamp, and can't get my turn properly!"

"Oh, hang it all!" quoth Jerry. "It's only a minor point!"

"Indeed it isn't! I have to point; it isn't a bit minor; if I don't, it throws my part out of focus. If I don't point, I don't play."

"Very well!" said the haggard young man. "Neither do I." They both laid down their brown-paper parts and seated themselves determinedly on the table.

Jerry clutched his hair. That atmosphere was tense with tragedy. Nan, unable to contain herself, burst out laughing.

"Why, what on earth does it matter?"

Four pairs of very grave eyes were turned upon her. The case was of vital importance. What had come to Nan that she failed to recognize that? . . .

. . . "I think we'll have tea now," said Philippa, breaking an awkward silence. "We can rehearse again afterwards." She started getting out cups and saucers from a cupboard let into the wall. Nan meanwhile interrogated Jerry concerning past A.H.A. students.

"You've heard of the Affinity, of course," said Jerry proudly. Yes, Nan had heard; everybody had heard of the Affinity. He had made a great hit in Pinero's last matrimonial problem play, and since then had become a shining light.

"I saw Cuckoo in Bournemouth. She's done well!"

"Yes, in a certain line. Let me see, who else is there?—d'you remember Maisie Rivers?—timid little thing; parson's daughter. She's blossomed out—musical comedy! I met her the other day with bangles and Poms and high heels and attendant 'boys'. Not much of the parsonage left. Pity!"

"And Eggs? What is he doing?"

"Eggs?—oh, Eggs has just had rather a good part offered him at the Diadem—almost a speaking part. He yawns."

"*What* does he do?"

"Rises at the end of the second act and yawns—the psychological moment; brings the curtain down; not easy at all!"

"And Janie?—little Janie Cathcart?—oh, and von Rabinger? Has Janie played Sappho or Francesca yet?"

"She played a 'Loaf of Bread' when I last saw her!" chimed in Philippa. "At least I saw her up to the knees. The rest was crust."

Then Jerry took up the thread: "Von Rabinger has chucked the stage. He went to a crystal-gazer to find out if he should become an architect or an artist. She gazed at his face and said 'Architect', quick. So he returned to Moravia."

"And Mara?" asked Nan.

"Mara—oh, Mara's done for!"

"Done for?"

"Married!"

"Oh!" in a very small voice.

"By-the-bye," continued Jerry cheerfully, "you're engaged, aren't you?—or something of the sort. Is he on the stage?"

"No,"—apologetically. "But his uncle was!" Nan was realizing the utter unimportance of love, wedding-rings, and such-like trivialities.

They sat down to tea. Nan couldn't follow their jargon any more. When she did screw up courage to speak, her voice sounded wrong:

"And you, Jerry, what are you doing?"

"I'm booked for an eleven weeks' tour from next Wednesday. We're taking Ibsen into the Midlands."

"I went North with Ibsen last year," struck in the haggard young man reminiscently; "the newspaper critics there 'discovered' him!—they 'discovered' he had startling new notions, and damned him right lustily in three columns of the local gazette."

"Of course, Ibsen is quite obsolete now," remarked the sage-green maiden.

Nan, who had shortly before read "Peer Gynt" for the first time, lowered her eyes guiltily.

"Did you ever," cried Jerry vehemently, "did you ever come across a more rotten play than the *Merchant of Venice*? Bad construction, bad characterization!"

It was on the tip of Nan's tongue to exclaim, "But it's by Shakespeare!" She restrained herself. When out of your depths it is well to remain silent.

"I don't know!" reflected Philippa in reply. "I rather like the prevailing fashion of playing Shylock as a Christian martyr. It's quaint."

"Oh, Shylock!"—the haggard young man waxed contemptuous. "There's only one part in the play, and that's Salarino. He carries the whole thing on his shoulders, if properly interpreted. Speeches are nothing. That entrance in the second act—what could be more subtle, more harmonious?—provided always the actor brings out the point!"

Symptoms of restiveness from the sage-green maiden at the word "point".

Nan rose to go. She had had enough. They were getting on her nerves, these keen, busy, gloriously self-satisfied young persons. . . .

"I must be off now!"

They bade her cordially good-bye. As she closed the door behind her, she could hear them pushing back the table to resume rehearsal.

She returned home with brain in a whirl. This had been her natural element—once! Once she had been a member of the intense and feverish brotherhood. Nothing much had altered since then. The Little World had slightly shifted its boundaries, that was all!—only now Nan belonged to the World That Didn't Count!

But it *did* count—and Jerry, Philippa and Co. were merely shadows!—or were they the reality? Then what was she? She and Tony?

Tony! She suddenly experienced an overwhelming longing for his voice, his touch. Perhaps it would dissipate for her this flat, fizzled-out sensation of aloneness. He was hers, solidly and tangibly hers. Hers to show in exchange for what she had lost.

She hugged the thought.

How she would make him laugh that evening over the sage-green maiden and the haggard young man. Nan had an unmistakable gift for mimicry.

Boy . . . Boy . . . It was better to be a "You and I" than to wear all the laurels ever laid at the feet of Bernhardt or Druse.

. . . Close on seven o'clock. Tony was probably waiting for her at Streatham Hill. She quickened her steps. It was their last evening; on the morrow she went back to Bournemouth. She dreaded the boarding-house and the long, empty days without him. Only a few perfect hours still, and then . . .

Yes, Tony was already home. Clad in evening clothes, he opened the front door.

"Girl dear, would you mind if I went out to-night?"

CHAPTER XXIII

"ALL THE KING'S HORSES . . ."

. . . NAN stood stock-still. She heard a far-away voice saying cheerily: "No, of course I don't mind, Boy! Why should I?" She believed it was her own voice, and marvelled at the light, commonplace tones. "Why should I mind?"

Tony snapped mental fingers at an invisible Vicomte.

"I knew you'd understand all right, Girl. Of course, if you had the slightest objection, I'd stop in."

Nan did not mention that it was her last evening. Dear me, no! The man has yet to be born who remembers birthdays, "this-time-last-year", "the-date-we-first-met". The girl is yet to be born who will remind him. Girls prefer to look hurt, and say: "Oh, nothing!" when the man asks them what the deuce is the matter—and he is puzzled, poor fellow!

Nan said not a word. She suspected that she was being put to the test. Pluckily she tried to respond.

"Of course I don't mind, Boy. We agreed about all that long ago. Have a good time. By-the-bye, where are you going?"

Tony told her. Oh, Tony told her everything! No Ladye of the Tower Room for the modern lover. He told her exactly, precisely, and in detail. He enlarged. He explained. He invited her sympathy and comprehension.

. . . Nan turned and walked deliberately upstairs. She was not actually unhappy at the moment, but she knew she was going to be when she had time to think it over, and was resentful in anticipation.

He bounded up the stairs after her. "Girl, would you rather I stayed at home?"

"Of course not,"—coldly.

Oh, she knew, she knew so well what he wanted of her; it was her "chance": she was to "understand"; to rise above pettiness and spite; to be big! broad-minded! fine!

And she longed to be small and narrow and jealous. To say little ugly things about the Other Woman. She longed to spoil his pleasure; to hurl her ring at his feet and quit the house; to put both her arms round his neck and implore him not to leave her.

Between one impulse and the other, she did—nothing at all. Shaking off his detaining hand, she went into her room and closed the door.

Tony remained leaning against the banisters, a victim to the bitterest disappointment.

So, when it came to it, she was the same as every other girl, this Nan of his. In spite of all they had planned, their life together would be the same as a million other lives. Crash! went the vision of the Man and his Mate swinging along side by side, free, joyous and unhampered. Vicomte was right—the other sex was only fit for the tower room and the spinning-wheel!

"I don't care," muttered Tony savagely. He slipped into his overcoat and departed.

Nan was left to think it over. . . .

"Why, where's Tony?" remarked Andrew at dinner.

"He's gone out," Nan replied quietly, and she rolled her bread into little pellets.

"Gone out?"—puzzled. "Surely not! I thought you were going away to-morrow?"

"I am."

"And do you mean to say he's gone out on your last evening? Sadie, do you hear that?"

"Don't be absurd and old-fashioned, Andrew!" said Sadie lightly. "They'll see each other again next week. Nan probably sent him out."

"Did you, Nan?" asked Andrew curiously.

"Yes. I didn't feel inclined for him this evening."

Andrew shook his head at the soup. "I can't understand you young people. Why, when I was engaged to Sadie——" He peered closer at Nan. "Hello! I believe you've been crying!"

"Why on earth should I cry?" in tones of blank amazement.

"Have you quarrelled with Tony?" persisted he of the Heavy Hoof. "You mustn't do that. Oh no, you mustn't do that. Give and take, that's our way, isn't it, Sadie?"

"Quite right, dear! You give, and I take. And, meanwhile, the lamb is getting cold!"

Her husband lifted the carving-knife, then let it fall with a splash into the gravy, as a new idea struck him: "Look here, let me talk to Tony when he comes home!"

Sadie once more darted to the rescue. "The wisest thing you can do, Andrew, is to let everybody manage their own affairs, and you attend to yours, which at the present moment is giving us something to eat!"

Andrew was quenched for the time being.

After dinner they played cut-throat bridge. Nan was very hilarious; she made jokes—bad ones—and chaffed Andrew on his mistakes! The latter caught at her hand when she passed him on the way to bed.

"Look here, Nan," said he, "don't you worry about Master Tony; he'll come back to you, never fear—and mind you give it to him hot when he does! It was a shame to leave you alone to-night—a shame!"

Nan wrenched her hand away and tore out of the room. If Tony had been handy just then, she would

have taken pleasure in knifing him. That he should have dared to make her an object for Andrew's pity!

. . . She employed the next hour or two very successfully developing from a minute molehill a very fine range of mountains.

If Boy really loved her, really and truly, he would not have gone out with the Other Woman, on her last evening; he would not have *wanted* to ! . . .

Thus she argued, along the path worn bare by the innumerable daughters of Eve who had trodden it before her.

It was such unanswerable logic! Communism, The New Era, H. G. Wells and the Freewoman all put together could not combine to shatter it.

. . . She heard Andrew and Sadie retire to bed, and was more than half undressed herself when the latchkey grated in the lock below.

The clock pointed to a quarter after midnight.

Tony's step passed her door, mounted to the attic.

A revulsion of feeling swept over Nan! She had failed him, she who had vowed never to fail him! He had begged for something—and she had coldly withheld it.

And this marvellous, shimmering fabric that had joined them, delicate as a fairy cobweb, invisible to every eye but theirs, had she indeed with her own hands rent it in twain? It could, of course, be mended, but the torn place would always show!

. . . The stillness was broken by the thump of Tony's boots on the floor above. Silence again. Everyone was asleep except she in her room, Tony in his. Of what was he thinking? Nan caught sight of herself in the mirror. She was flushed, and her eyes were dark and shadowy. Over her shoulders she threw the amber-coloured kimono worked with scarlet poppies. Heavy masses of hair framed her face and hung down to her waist. . . .

What did the Other Woman look like?

. . . "I have never seen you with your hair down, Girl!" . . . When had he said that? Then she remembered; it was on their dream-journey to Paris. She had won him that night with the help of silk and scent!—Suppose—suppose——

Softly she slid open her door and crept up the stairs; how loudly they creaked and groaned beneath her light step! . . . The landing at last! . . . She paused beside a pair of muddy boots. A gleam of light shone from beneath Tony's door. . . . Her very breath suspended, Nan stood and listened. . . . She heard the sharp click of the electric switch . . . the gleam of light merged into blackness. Her hand stole out towards the handle of the door, touched it, and then——

Then swiftly she turned on her heel, tore down the stairs like a hunted thing—back, back to her own room . . . locked and double-locked the door—and leaned panting, exhausted, against the bed!

. . . And the Thirteenth Fairy smiled again!

Bacon and eggs and cold grey light, and Andrew with a muffler round his neck in lieu of collar!

Nan was late that morning, and as Tony attacked his breakfast, he wondered what attitude she was about to take up. He felt it would need all her charm to weave about them once more the glamour of Togetherness.

After all, not many men would have behaved as he had done last night, considering the way she had treated him; most men would have made that the excuse for . . . well, at any rate, he was rather a fine fellow, was Tony!

For the Other Woman had worn a wonderful garment of blue and purple, and had handled him with the finesse which only comes from deep, deep knowledge

and experience. And he? He had talked to her of Nan, and of the performing dogs on the stage, and at the end of the show had put her into a taxi, and then walked alone about the streets, his nerves racked and on edge from the strain.

Yes, by Jove! Nan would have to be very nice to him that morning!

Ah, here she was!

Tony did not appreciate the difficulty of being fascinating in a blue serge frock, over a dish of porridge. To be sure, Andrew did his best to help them along. He oozed tactfulness from every pore, did Andrew.

Sadie, luxurious little wretch, always took her breakfast in bed.

Perhaps if Girl and Boy had been left alone, they might at least have come within hailing distance of each other; as it was . . .

Two children, boring a tunnel one on either side of a sand castle!—how they toil and toil that their hands may finally touch in the centre—but perhaps one has begun his labours too high up or too low down; somehow they do not meet, only scoop out sand.

. . . "Was the performance good last night?" queried Nan carelessly. "Did Johnny appear?"

"No, he's billed for next week!" Tony launched into a feverish description of acrobats and Russian dancers.

"I heard you come in."

"Oh? I thought you'd be asleep by then!"

"I wasn't." A wave of hot colour swept over Nan's face.

. . . Two pairs of eyes furtively watched Andrew at his breakfast, the same thought knocking at their minds.

Would he go on eating to all eternity?

Ah, at last!—but no!

"I think I'll have some ham; Tony, would you mind touching the bell?"

Tony jabbed an irritable finger on the white button, and announced his departure for the office—ugh! loathsome hole!

"Aren't you going to see him to the door, Nan?"

Nan had already half risen to do so. At Andrew's words she stubbornly resumed her seat. What right had Tony to be so horrid? She hadn't done anything; it was he! She had expected to find him at his sweetest that morning, if only to make amends.

"Good-bye, Boy."

He came back and kissed her. Their eyes met. For an instant both pleaded, pleaded mutely with the other . . .

"See you to-night, Girl!"

"Nan is going back to Bournemouth to-day," put in Andrew, his mouth full of ham. "Didn't you know?"

"Going back to-day!"—amazed.

"I told you I could only stay till Saturday,"—carelessly.

"I forgot; why didn't you remind me last night? I'd have——"

"It doesn't matter. You'll run down next week, I suppose?"

"Yes, of course. Expect me on Friday evening; I'll cut Saturday's business."

"That's not the way to get on,"—from Andrew.

Tony ignored him. "Good-bye, Girl dear!" . . . he was gone.

It struck Nan that she couldn't face the next seven days with matters in their present condition. It simply couldn't be done. She followed Tony into the hall—in time to hear the front gate clang behind him—and clang again—and one last feeble clang before it finally settled on its hinges.

The next seven days would have to be faced.

But they were ghastly.

Till then, she had not realized how closely two separate lives can become entangled. Ever since last October the strands had been gradually knit closer and closer. Thoughts of the future were expressed in the phrase "When Boy and I——"; memories of the past dismissed with "Before Boy and I——"

She had grown accustomed to speaking to people with Tony as an invisible audience. Every action of hers, the tiniest, resolved itself into the words with which she would describe it to him. She laughed for both of them when some incident struck her as amusing. And through it all ran, like a golden thread, the consciousness that he, wherever he might chance to be, was doing exactly the same.

Now existence as a separate entity became wholly devoid of meaning—a puzzle picture without the clue.

Still, on Friday it would all come right again. It was bound to come right when they could have it out, face to face.

. . . At four o'clock Nan stood at the window, looking for Tony—knowing perfectly well that he could not be expected till a quarter-past seven.

At five o'clock she dressed herself—in case he suddenly arrived—knowing perfectly well he could not be expected till a quarter-past seven.

From six to seven she settled herself with a book and an appropriate attitude, in four different reception rooms, till driven out of each by the odd bits of humanity who drifted in with crochet and newspapers, and tried to engage Nan in pleasant conversation.

From seven till a quarter-past, she told herself he would not come—without, however, believing for a moment in that awful possibility.

At half-past seven the dinner-gong rang. Nan sat

through the first three courses repeating mechanically that he naturally would not appear till after dinner. During the last three courses and the coffee, her mood changed; she said that she had never expected him to turn up at all.

After dinner she retired to her room and ordered a fire to be lit. They would send word when he arrived. Perhaps if he could elude Uncle and Mrs. Hartmann he would run up to her himself, and then the fire-light might help them find their lost Wonder-World.

. . . She rehearsed what he would say, and what she would say in reply, and what he would say then. It was all so easy. . . .

Nine o'clock!

She sat tense. Heaven, Earth and Hell; Past, Present and Future; Life, Death and Eternity—all were concentrated in that time of waiting, waiting for a step on the stairs.

She built up the fire. When it burned itself down again to a charred heap of embers, she would give up hope and go to bed.

. . . In the meantime he would come; he *must* come.

But she knew that he wouldn't!

"I knew it all along," she said to whomever it might concern.

"Then why did you put on that dress and those stockings?" replied Whomever-it-might-concern sternly.

. . . It seemed that it was not Boy at all whom she was expecting, but some stranger who called himself Tony, and wore Tony's face. Some stranger who was hurting her.

Just as if Boy could ever hurt her—it was absurd!

. . . The minutes ticked on . . . outside, the tide rose steadily, moaning as it upcrept over the stones. . . .

The fire flickered . . . crumbled into a red glowing cave. Presently that would pale . . . the warmth die out. . . .

The Girl slid from her chair and crouched on to the ground. Something solid beneath her in the midst of black whirling chaos. She wished she could put her wretchedness into some tangible form . . . it might not be so bad then! . . .

The words came. A mere empty jingle at first:

. . . "All the King's horses . . . and all the King's men
Couldn't put Humpty-Dumpty together again! . . .

. . . "All the King's horses and all the King's men
Couldn't put Humpty-Dumpty together again!" . . .

Nan repeated the couplet over and over, and drew strange comfort from its utter, dreary hopelessness. The monotonous croon of her voice acted as a drug. The two lines held all there was to say in the whole wide world! She needn't worry to think it out any further. . . .

"All the King's horses and all the King's men
Couldn't put Humpty-Dumpty together again!"

. . . There was a syllable too much in the last line; it worried her—pulled her back each time with a jerk—disturbed the even soothing beat:

"All the King's horses and all the King's men . . ."

. . . . . .

. . . At the very height of wonder—
Flop! ! ! Bang! ! !

Down came the drop-scene. "Here we are again!"—and the audience roared and stamped with delight as Clown and Pantaloon, Harlequin, Columbine and Policeman disported themselves merrily up and down a dingy back street, in and out of a sausage-shop!

. . . Nan was utterly bewildered. "It's ugly! Tell them to bring the other back!"

She was made to realize that the "Palace of a Thousand Lights" had vanished irrevocably, could never be brought back.

"Never?" . . .

. . . . . .

. . . "All the King's horses and all the King's men . . ." Couldn't put Humpty-Dumpty together again!" . . .

No, no, don't let the fire go out! Not right out! . . . When the last little bit of red glow burns down, it means that he will not come!—Please, please, don't let it go out . . . not yet. . . . not for a few minutes yet. . . .

CHAPTER XXIV

THE GIRL WHO DID THE RIGHT THING

. . . NAN blinked lazily at the blinds, and the wall-paper, and the patterned splashes of sunlight that lay above the floor—then, remembering, dived her head beneath the quilt, with a fixed determination to remain there, where it was dark . . . there was nothing to get up for.

Letters!—she tossed aside the bedclothes and sat upright. Supposing Tony had written, written to explain his defalcation of the evening before. Why, perhaps he was ill—oh, poor Boy, perhaps he was very ill! (Tony, in twenty-four-and-a-half years, had only once undergone twelve hours' pain, and that was mainly due to the effects of swallowing two portions of liver and bacon *after* strawberry ice and meringues.)

The morning sounds in a boarding-house differ sadly from the familiar hullabaloo that greets the ear on awakening at home. The heavy tread of unknown feet, the clank of numberless hot-water cans, distant taps at blank doors—nearer and nearer.

"Come in!" cried Nan eagerly.

The chambermaid entered and pulled up the blinds.

"Another fine day, Miss."

"Yes." What was that in her hand, blue against the white towels?

"We're lucky considering the time of the year."

"Yes." It *was* a letter!—why—why didn't she hand it over?

"Though they do say as there'll be a gale blowing on us in a day or two."

"Yes." The envelope didn't look like Tony, somehow; it was oblong—Tony's would be square. Nan wished it were not undignified to leap out of bed and snatch.

"And here's a letter, Miss." Sarah departed.

. . . It was not from Tony. Nan threw the offending epistle to the other end of the room. How just like Connie Rosenfelt to tantalize her with envelopes on to-day of all days.

She did not read the letter till breakfast-time. It contained news: Connie had fulfilled her destiny, was engaged to be married. She was very, very happy. And Nan must come up from Bournemouth and stay with them for the week-end, and be introduced to Ludwig. They were expecting a crowd of visitors on Sunday. Nan could help to receive. Ludwig had ordered such a beautiful basket of lilies of the valley.

The letter radiated mild triumph.

"You must go, of course," decreed Mrs. Hartmann, all a-flutter; she tried hard to persuade herself that she was pleased at the tidings, instead of undergoing the

pangs of torture which increased tenfold at each announcement of the marriage of someone else's daughter. "Of course you must go—your best friend!"

"She isn't my best friend, mother; we haven't a single idea in common."

"But you were brought up together; we always called her your best friend."

"We've changed since then."

"Nonsense! If she was your best friend then, she must be your best friend now; true friendship doesn't alter."

Nan packed her suit-case without further protest. Perhaps it was just as well that she should thus be hurled back into the old order of things. Perhaps that was, after all, her proper sphere, and held compensations she had hitherto overlooked.

Ludwig Goldschmidt, trotted out for her inspection that same evening, proved to be rotund of form and shiny of head. The general impression was a flash—whether of teeth, tie-pin or watch-chain, it was difficult to say. He considered Connie an excellent acquisition, and had given her a very costly ring in addition to the basket of lilies.

Connie's mother felt she had not lived in vain. Telegrams, flowers, visitors, presents!—the bell never ceased ringing; the house was in a state of orderly ferment, and on the morrow Mr. and Mrs. Rosenfelt were "at home".

Nan was more pleased than annoyed when, at two p.m. on Sunday, her room was invaded by Aunt Bertha, who, entering without knocking, proceeded to disapprove of Nan's frock, twitch and pull at her hair, comment on her stockings and give hints as to the afternoon's course of behaviour.

. . . It was all as it ever was and ever would be, world without end. When Connie had a daughter, and

the latter became engaged, Connie would behave in exactly the same fashion towards the daughter's best friend!

So Nan listened without protest to the flow of advice and reprimand, and was irresistibly reminded of her juvenile parties: the unwonted thrill of a fire to dress by, the long rest on the bed prior to staying up till nine p.m.; then an extra soaping (behind the ears), a big white satin bow in the hair, and the mention of some little boy of whom she was to take particular care! . . .

. . . Mrs. Rosenfelt went on speaking:

"I particularly wish you to look after August Goldschmidt, dear Ludwig's brother. He is to be best man at the wedding, but to-day will feel, perhaps, a little shy, awkward. I leave him in your charge."

Well, and why not? Ludwig and Connie, Ludwig's brother and Connie's best friend. What could be more suitable?—Mrs. Rosenfelt, her own daughters being *versorgt*, was benevolently inclined. She had never taken seriously to the notion of Tony; he was not "responsible" of that she felt sure—and fancy sending a girl red roses for her betrothal bouquet! It was—it was almost indecent!

"Please, Madam, the man wants to see you about the refreshments."

Nan was released. She went to Connie's room.

"What a pretty dress!"

"Yes, do you like it? Ludwig hasn't seen it yet. Of course there was hardly time to get anything properly made. But Ludwig likes me in white!" Connie spoke more rapidly than was her wont. She was being whirled from one excitement to another. It is a bewildering thing suddenly to find oneself the centre of the universe. "Ludwig likes me in white."

"Are you in love with him?"—abruptly.

"Of course I love him." There was a subtle difference in this; then: "You are funny, Nan!"

Could one love a Ludwig Goldschmidt—could one?—and if so, how? Nan felt merciless; she continued her questions—brutal, direct questions:

"Do you like him to touch you?"

Connie rubbed hard at her nails, polishing and trimming. She didn't speak.

"Connie!"

"I don't think you ought to ask me that, Nan."

"Why?—we're both engaged. We must have thought about it—or haven't you?"

"There's been so much to think about—telephoning people, and choosing the ring and meeting his relations; and then he wants to be married in April, next month. You see, one can't in May, and he won't wait till June. So there'll be the trousseau and the wedding."

"And after the wedding?"

"Then we shall have to furnish a house."

"You'll honeymoon first, I suppose. Don't you ever think about that?"

"I suppose it'll be all right," said Connie vaguely.

Nan suddenly saw herself stained and wise and old. . . .

Three girls in a bedroom, wondering about "things", and the river lapping the banks at the far end of the garden. Three girls in a bedroom—and now two of them had found their destinies, widely different destinies, yet accepted with the same careless fatalism: "What's the odds?" cried Cuckoo, and "I suppose it'll be all right", murmured Connie. Only she, Nan, still hesitated at the cross-roads, choosing first this path, and then that—doubting, fearing, dreaming, probing at herself and others, wasting time—till one day, all

the paths would be closed to her, and she would remain, a unit in the great army of Left-Over Ones. . . .

But Jenny had said there was not much fear of that. Jenny, the little dressmaker with the rosy cheeks, and the two-year-old bundle of curls and muslin at her side. Jenny was much happier than Fräulein Nauheim, who had remained a good woman. Yes, but . . .

Beside the point, all this, except that Nan was coming to a decision. It merely needed a finger to loosen the spring, and all these pent-up emotions would resolve themselves into action.

Enter then Mrs. Rosenfelt. "Well, girls, are you ready? It's nearly three o'clock—you had better go downstairs, both of you. People will be arriving soon. How flushed you are, Nan. It's not becoming. What have you two been gossiping about?"

"Nothing!" said Nan.

Mrs. Rosenfelt looked at her sharply. However hard she strove to assure herself and others that young girls should be merely young girls, a species apparently bereft of intelligence and personality, yet there was something about Nan— Well, she had years ago predicted to Anna Hartmann that the child was going to have a temperament. If Anna Hartmann had not chosen to take steps, it was Anna Hartmann's own fault.

An automobile drawing up before the front door, announced the advent of a prosperous, exotic and heavily-furred batch of visitors. Mrs. Rosenfelt hastened down. More slowly, Nan and Connie followed her, Connie a few paces in advance, as was fit and proper.

Ludwig joined them in the hall, kissed the hand of his betrothed, and presented to Nan: "My brother August".

Brother August clicked his heels together and murmured, "*Sehr erfreut*". He did not look it. Newly

imported from Frankfurt, he hated England with a hatred that could only be appeased by telling him that he—looked like an Englishman!

Within half an hour the three great apartments on the ground floor were so full that one might almost have feared a "crush". More and more flowers arrived, more and more telegrams; a long line of carriages and motors stood outside. The babel of tongues rose ever higher, mingling with a prevailing chorus of: "*Doesn't* she look happy!"

Four or five obstreperous children, between the ages of nine and fourteen (cousins and sisters of Ludwig), darted incessantly to and fro between the hall and the buffet, diving under hats, making themselves sick with cake, and sporting proudly on their wrists gold chain-bracelets set with diamonds: "Ludwig gave them to us!"—Prospective bridesmaids, these.

A goodly supply of aunts were also very much in evidence, their faces beaming with joy: "I declare, I'm as pleased about it as if it were my own child!"

They patted Connie, and fussed over her, and every now and then brought her a glass of port-wine. Verily, to every dog his day!

The lady who had made the match, distinguished by her bouquet of mauve irises, was in great demand. Many a time and oft did she relate how she had first brought the young people together, and what Ludwig had confided to her respecting Connie, and so on. . . .

. . . "*Were* you surprised?"

"No, were *you*?"

"*I* wasn't surprised!"

"Were *you* surprised——" . . . the clamour was deafening.

Damsels still belonging to the ranks of the Unchosen hung about against walls and pillars, and were frequently

informed by arch old gentlemen: "A-a-ah, it'll be your turn next!" They hated the arch old gentlemen, and they hated themselves and each other, and most of all they hated Connie. Nor could they rise and depart from the scene of their sorrow, their respective mothers were too busy tying themselves in congratulatory festoons around Mrs. Rosenfelt.

Nan had taken an instant dislike to Brother August. Also, she made at the outset a bad blunder. Casting about for a suitable opening in conversation, she decided on: "How do you like being a prospective brother-in-law?" as being sufficiently festive—and futile—to meet the occasion. Was it her fault that a slip of the tongue resulted in: "How do you like being a prospective uncle?"

August repeated this to Ludwig, who, disregarding Connie's blushes, gleefully retailed it for the benefit of the entire company. Nan caught her Aunt Bertha's eye and knew herself in disgrace. And from that moment onwards she was seized with an irresistible desire to shock, to shock wildly and indiscriminately. Already the opulent atmosphere had bred in her a queer, defiant kind of excitement. How funny they were, all these people! Like figures moved by clockwork, they played their parts, said their speeches. And she? What was her part?—Brother August, obviously, and a meek and helpful demeanour: ("Let *me* fetch it, Auntie Bertha!"). Well, she just wouldn't. She would be herself, no matter if it clashed with the accepted standards of what she ought to be!

And withal she found herself strangely resentful of the process of elbow-rubbing which now placed her outside the walls of Jerusalem:

"Mother ought to have kept me stricter!"

Oh, Nan! Unreasonable, perverse and wholly feminine Nan! For who was wont to prate to Mrs. Hartmann of

the Crushing of My Individuality, and the Right to Live my Own Life?—who but Nan?

One of the afore-mentioned arch old gentlemen approached her, fell purpose in his eye. "Little Miss Hartmann—well I never!—and grown to be quite a woman!—it'll be your turn next, mark my words!"

Nan was unenthusiastic.

Nothing daunted, he proceeded: "And how is your mother?"

"Quite well, thank you!"

"And your uncle?"

"Quite well, thank you!"

"And your Aunt Huldah?" (for whom he had once cherished an affection).

"Quite well, thank you!"

"And your Aunt Teresa?"

It struck Nan that, artistically speaking, her replies were becoming monotonous. She supplied variation by endowing Aunt Teresa with a cold; a feverish cold; a cold that might at any moment fly to the chest; to the lungs; develop into pneumonia; perhaps it *was* pneumonia—you never know! . . . A little while longer, and the glowingly robust old lady would have been laid in her coffin! As it was, it came as a great surprise to her to receive that evening (from the arch old gentleman) muscatel grapes and messages of earnest solicitude.

Brother August elbowed his way to Nan's side, with a strawberry ice. She rejected it.

"You would prefer something else?—a caviare sandwich?"—Neither. "You are right. It is not pleasant, this standing up to eat!"—He launched into an elaborate description of betrothal-feasts in the Fatherland, with details as to the number and quality of dishes provided. Nan scarcely listened. Brother August was

puzzled; what subject interested this curious girl with the red, scornful mouth?—he had tried concerts, food, compliments—all in vain.

Sport—of course! In England they lived for sport.

"I fence," said Nan briefly, when questioned on her favourite form of exercise. She had learned fencing at the School of Acting. Rather astonished, the man proudly exhibited four white scars across his convict-cropped head, souvenirs from the Heidelberg University.

"But I thought that in England one only knew the Box. Pah! It is ugly, this boxing!"

"It isn't."

"My dear young lady, if you saw something of it, your mind you would change."

Nan was silent. Seated on a table in the corner of the dining-room, she commanded an excellent view of the entire assembly. Footmen were silently gliding to and fro with tea and coffee and expensive dainties. Visitors removed their white kid gloves. Glossy young Israelites, warming up, began to make overtures to the Unchosen damsels. Fathers and uncles formed a benign background in doorways. The ceilings twinkled softly shaded lights. Over the shoulder of a fat and be-diamonded matron could be seen a glimpse of Connie, gazing placidly at her ring, Ludwig in prominent attendance. A huge harp of flowers had just arrived and was being borne across the thick plush carpet by more velvet-heeled footmen.

All was luxury, warmth; smug, purring content. . . .

Nan flung back her head and the pupils of her eyes darkened with mischief.

In clear, defiant tones she described, for the edification of Brother August, a boxing-match that she had witnessed in the East End.

Tony was an expert featherweight, and had insisted on dragging her along to share his enthusiasm over a

twenty-round contest between Ned Walker and the Camberwell Kid.

She was glad of the experience now!

. . . "A round hall packed from floor to ceiling with hard wooden benches, the air thick with smoke—you breathed it in chunks! . . . Where the smoke cleared were faces, coarse, eager faces. Faces that Hogarth might have painted. There were hundreds of men—and two women besides myself—no, three. They wore a lot of sham jewellery." . . .

She drew a vivid picture of the raised dais in the centre of the hall, the dais on which all eyes were fixed. The referee; the ringmaster, in evening-dress; the seconds, with their towels and sponges, leaping over the ropes at the end of every round, flapping great currents of air to refresh the combatants, whilst the latter sat panting, arms outstretched, grudging each second as it flew by. . . .

By this time, Nan found herself the centre of an interested group, mostly male. Sons of the House of Israel, who would deeply resent any similar tirade on the part of sister or fiancée, beckoned one another to approach: "Just listen to this!" Nan could speak well when the mood took her. The sight of Brother August, with arched eyebrows and mouth like an enormous O, urged her on. She was vaguely aware of her Aunt Bertha's horrified expression—somewhere in the dim distance. It didn't matter! The ringing note in her own voice intoxicated her. So did the admiration in her hearers' faces. She just went on and on—recklessly. . . . "Two men, stripped naked to the waist—fine fellows, both of them, their flesh gleaming white in the murky atmosphere. They darted to and fro, graceful, crouching, watchful—like panthers—perfect masters of the science. And the roar of voices never ceased, rose and fell, as breakers on the shingle; the audience

booed and hissed—cheered and laid bets. Camberwell Kid was favourite at first. Then he went down—crash! Someone yelled that it was a foul—but the referee said 'No'. A voice began to count—one . . . two . . . three—the man writhed on the ground, attempted to rise, fell again, dragged his body to the ropes—slowly and painfully pulled himself erect . . . eight . . . nine. . . . Ah, he's up!—and the fight goes on." . . .

"That will do, Nan!"

Nemesis was upon her in the shape of Mrs. Rosenfelt, white with anger. "Run upstairs and fetch me my sable stole—on the third shelf of the cupboard!" Then, in a penetrating whisper: "I'm thoroughly ashamed of you. You'll never get a husband if you go on like this!"

The circle of listeners nudged each other, and parted to let Nan through, half sorry that the narrative should be interrupted, half ashamed at the suppressed animal within them that had reared its head at the call. . . .

"She told it well, little Nan Hartmann!"

"Queer place for a girl to have been, though!"

"Yes! I wonder . . ."

Nan did not go upstairs for the stole.

She went straight to the telephone at the far end of the passage.

She gave the number and waited. The cool air fanned her burning cheeks and hot eyes. And she was glad, exultantly glad of what she had done—of what she was going to do. Glad that she did not belong to these people—would never belong to them now. . . .

The receiver whirred and buzzed at her ear. Through the glass doors floated a far-away clamour of conversation. There was a fierce, unholy joy in thus crossing the Rubicon, in the very Temple of Respectability. . . .

. . . "Hello! ! !"

—Tony's voice. Nan clutched the receiver tighter. Her heart gave a wild bound up into her throat—stayed there, throbbing. . . .

"Boy, it's me!" . . .

—"Why, Girl . . ."

"Boy, I'll come if you still want me!"

—"Come where?—speak louder, Girl!——"

"To Paris!—don't you remember?"

Her voice was drowned by a noisy knock and ring at the front door; more messages of congratulation for the Girl who had done the Right Thing!

. . . "I can't hear, Boy. . . . Wait a minute——"

The subsequent clatter died away. Then, low and eager over the wire, came Tony's reply. . . .

CHAPTER XXV

AT THE EDGE OF BEYOND

It wasn't the Boy's fault. He did all that was expected of a Principal Boy. He arranged to meet the Principal Girl on the morrow, beneath the Lovers' Dial in the Domes of Romance!—under the clock at Charing Cross! He spent the whole of Monday morning in earnest conclave with dark-eyed wizards, infamously yclept pawnbrokers; and they filled his pockets with gold and silver. At ten minutes past two in the afternoon he hailed a snorting yellow chariot and dashed furiously through the streets and up the paved courtyard to the trysting-place. To be sure, he was ten minutes behind the time, and his queen had been ten minutes before the time, which gave her twenty minutes to wait in the Hall of Many Draughts—and incidentally twenty minutes more thinking than was strictly necessary!—

but then how fervently he clasped her hands, how gallantly he relieved her of her suit-case. No, decidedly it wasn't the fault of the Boy.

Nor was it the Girl's fault. She bade good-bye to Mrs. Rosenfelt and Connie like one in a dream. Like one in a dream she told the driver "Waterloo", en route for Bournemouth, and then, when out of earshot, altered the direction to Charing Cross. There, as I said, she waited for twenty minutes, and when the Boy came finally striding to her side, and whispered: "Isn't this—*fun*! !" she replied ecstatically: "*Ra-ther*!" with an accompanying look. So it certainly wasn't the fault of the Girl.

The fault lay with the wheels of the train. They wouldn't sing. They just wouldn't. Nine hundred and nine-and-ninety times had Boy and Girl sat alone in a train and fitted any tune they pleased to the throb and the clang beneath them. But to-day it was all in vain. The wheels always gave a clang too much or too little. And from that point everything went—not wrong, oh, not wrong!—but just not quite right.

According to programme, they sat in a reserved carriage; their dream-journey of the week before was to be echoed as nearly as possible. Paris gleamed ahead: London scowled behind. The lights grew rarer and rarer . . . died away.

The Girl knelt up on the seat and stared out of the window. The Boy came and stood beside her. They could see little save dim grey patches of field and bank, and behind it all, a lurid, wind-blown sunset. But anything was better than looking at each other. Nan did not want to look at Tony; she tried several times, and could not lift her eyes higher than the white line of his collar. The wind tore and buffeted at the glass; one of the windows stood open three inches at the top,

admitting great screaming gusts of air. Nan shivered; she wore a rather thin blue serge frock, with a little jacket to match, and a dark fur cap. Her face seemed white and small—very small.

"Can you shut it, Boy?"

He tugged and tugged at the strap, but something had stuck. "No good! I'm awfully sorry, Girl dear!"

"Never mind. It doesn't matter."

He wrapped a rug around her, and sat down in the corner opposite. It suddenly struck him that things had gone a little flat; he immediately whipped himself up to a fever-heat of enthusiasm.

"Girl, this is the Great Adventure!"

"I know!"—in a ringing voice. "We're doing it at last!"

"What does it feel like to you?"

She told him what she knew it ought to be feeling like; you can do that sort of thing if you have an imagination.

Then they talked about Paris, and their life together, and all the queer places they were going to see; and the wonderful things they were going to do, with none to say them nay. They had to shriek to make their voices heard above the storm outside. Tony confessed to just fifty pounds in his pocket. They would spend lavishly, royally; one week of perfection! One week! How many people could claim to have wrested even that out of a lifetime? Nan steadfastly fixed her eyes on these seven dazzling days, and refused to look beyond them—(She was really not very much better than Connie!) . . .

Finally:

"Are you afraid?" he asked.

"No. Of course I'm not afraid. Not a little bit. Why should I be? I'm gloriously happy!"

"No" by itself ought to have been sufficient, but it seemed to her that it couldn't stand without props; it was not a vigorous "No". So she added all the rest.

Tony suggested that she should lean against him—"and we'll dream dreams!"

But this didn't quite come off either. You can't dream a dream while it is actually happening. It's putting the horse after the cart. Besides, they both badly wanted to clear up their recent misunderstanding, and both felt that the attitude expected by the other was a superb unconsciousness of the whole affair. So they did not clear it up. Tony kissed her instead—again—and again, and she kissed him back, and they tried to work up steam that way.

The train thundered on, leaving in its track long empty lines of steel which unfolded like glistening ribbons in the wake of the last compartment. Well might the stoker exert himself to the utmost, fill the echoing night with fiery clouds of smoke! There were two people behind him chasing an Hour, an exquisite Hour; but the Hour had over a week's start of them, was born of a leathern armchair and a glowing fire. They must hurry if they still wished to overtake it.

Past five o'clock. They ought to be nearing Dover by now. Tony started strapping together the rugs and bags. Remembering that Nan liked to see him at this job—"You look so sturdy and competent and British!"—he sought to acquit himself particularly well. The train lurched and swayed; his fingers, numbed with cold, refused to obey orders. He bungled badly. Nan watched him with grave eyes.

"Hang!"—he tried to laugh it off—"I am a clumsy ass! Give me a hand, Girl, will you?"

She succeeded where he had failed. Tony caressingly placed his hands on her shoulders.

"Little mate!"

She shook him off, unreasonably annoyed. Just at the moment, she didn't want to be his little mate, she wanted to be looked after.

. . . Lights—tiny dots of yellow amidst a vast, howling chaos. And the air blew suddenly fresher, colder, as the express tore into Dover station.

It was almost impossible to stand upright, the wind swept so ferociously amongst the struggling crowds who elbowed their way towards the steamer. Nan caught a glimpse of tumbling, dark-green waves, hurling themselves against the slime-covered walls of the harbour. Beyond the black outlines of the Channel boat, tossing white horses could be descried on the surface of the shining water. Masses of cloud were driven so hurriedly across the threatening sky, that they had not time to scatter more than a few drops of rain. The *Britannia* rolled ominously from side to side, jangling the cables that held her fast. Wiseacres prophesied a rough crossing, dirty seas beyond the harbour. Disjointed fragments of this reached Nan's ears. She clutched at Tony's arm:

"Boy, I can't go aboard! I shall be ill!"

He stopped, irresolute, at the foot of the gangway.

"But, Kiddie dear——"

"I know!—but I can't. Look at the sea."

"But what shall we do?" People were hustling and buffeting them from behind.

"I'm not going to cross in this gale!" Her teeth chattered. A whiff of hot steam from the funnel blew across her nostrils. She felt sick already. "Boy—please!"

"You—you don't want to go back?—give it up?" Tony's face showed white in the half-light.

"No."

He thought over the situation. Then: "We'll stay

here for the night, and cross to-morrow morning," said he firmly. Hailing a porter, he bade him carry their luggage to the nearest hotel.

"'Arbour 'Otel, sir?"

"That'll do." Tony tucked his arm under Nan's. "It's all right, Girl, I understand!"

A great building loomed over the road, immediately behind the station. They entered the hall; it struck a ponderous note of gloom. The girl at the office barely looked at them as she handed over the counter the brass disc that indicated the number of their room. A weary-looking official took possession of their suit-cases, and ushered them into the lift. They shot up to the fourth floor. Down a drab passage. Into Number Seventy-one. Their luggage dumped on the ground. And the official disappeared, muttering something inaudible to the effect that he would send the chambermaid.

Nan and Tony were left alone. She sat on the bed. He leaned up against the door.

"Well?"

"Well?"

Silence. This was not the journey of their dreams. Nor could he make love to her here.

"What time is it?"

He consulted his watch.

"Twenty-five to seven. We'd better have something to eat." Nan felt uneasy and uncomfortable. She announced her intention of slipping on another blouse and washing her hands.

"Very well!"—he could not dispossess himself of the idea that this was her room, he an intruder on its sanctity.

"I'll smoke a cigarette in the lounge till you join me—just as we planned at the Elysée Palace!"—with a smile. Then: "Good-bye, Kiddie darling! Don't be too long!" He threw a deep note of tenderness into his

voice—but it did not seem to reach Nan! Perhaps it was muffled on the way by the dusty velvet hangings of the room!

The chambermaid knocked and entered. . . .

CHAPTER XXVI

MOON-LOVER

THE lounge proved a vast, empty apartment, smelling of leather and Bradshawe and stale tobacco. Tony smoked one cigarette to the finish, lit another, and then, depressed by his surroundings, strolled out to the sea.

And there the wind claimed him!

Oh, the huge, buffeting gusts of it! The God-impelled, tangible masses that catch the cheeks and seem to be driven right to the heart of one! All the insane, hysterical joy! The exhilaration!—Uplifting! Inspiring! The utter, utter purity of it. Now soughing softly to the hiss of the chopping waves . . . now still . . . now shrieking—wailing—charging like a giant herd gone mad. . . .

Tony swung along, the salt from the blown sea stinging his lips; the tang and scent of leagues of open space whirling about him—a tossed, exultant little atom of humanity, woven in with the elemental scheme of things, forgetting all else.

. . . And then she came!—darting past him like a storm-sprite, in pursuit of an errant tam-o'-shanter. He captured it for her. She thanked him with a laugh—and paused. . . .

A strand of her hair was whipped across his face. He drew back. Yes! Pierrot drew back. . . .

And with a tiny toss of the head, she vanished again into the blackness, leaving behind her the recollection of lashes heavy with spray, and a flushed, wind-bitten cheek that he had not kissed.

Never again, never again, oh, Pierrot, to sally forth with your lute on the quest of Romance and light adventure. Your adventure is waiting for you in Number Seventy-one of the Harbour Hotel. Now and for ever, Pierrot! And passing sprites must be allowed to—pass!

. . . The moon shone out bright and clear for a moment; then hid her face again, as if for shame that one of her elected should have come to this!

Tony struggled blindly on, full against the wind, his hands clenched and rebellion surging at his heart. . . .

Yes, he owned it at last. Out there, amidst the shattering forces of Nature, he could not smother it with feather-bed arguments: he *was* rebellious.

He knew, oh, so well, that Nan was unfitted for the rôle he had assigned to her. She was no "little mate". She would never make a Bohemian. Never let the morrow take care of itself. Never rub shoulders happily with the best and the worst, the rovers and dreamers outside the charmed circle. Nor would she ever let Love go when he wearied of his chains; play with hearts as one plays with shuttlecock and battledore. No, she had given herself to Tony—she would remain his. The word "marriage" had not been mentioned between them, but he knew that, with forms or without them, he would that night be as surely wedded as if the parson spoke the words—wedded to responsibility and to his own vows.

And he wanted to be free, wanted it piteously. Free to take to the open road, free to kiss a pair of scarlet lips, to dart Will-o'-the-Wisp-like from one fresh toy to another. Free to be young and sad, and glory in his

sadness. Free to make of life a song and a handful of confetti!

But he was not a scoundrel. No, not even that. He would never have the heart to make Nan unhappy. He loved her!—But oh, Lady Moon! Lady Moon, can you not save your son?

. . . Somehow or other he found himself in Dover High Street, gazing vacantly at a plate-glass window which announced in white letters: "Garage. Motors repaired and for hire". Up the side of the shop ran a cobbled lane. A car was just then being driven in, a huge, panting, forty horse-power Rolls-Royce. The chauffeur saluted Tony, who stared back, astonished. Then memory hit him; one of the many posts he had filled—and abandoned—was in the engineering-room of the well-known firm known as Gates and Greenwood. They owned a branch in Dover. And this particular chauffeur still had a lively recollection of Tony.

"Fine car, this, sir. Takes hills like an h'angel. We're testing her. Would you like a run yourself? I'm busy and can't go no further, but there's plenty of petrol."

Tony nodded. Yes, he would go for a short spin; it suited his mood. He seized the wheel, backed the car into the road: "I shan't be more than ten minutes!"—and laughed to feel the engine pounding and quivering beneath his touch, like a hound held in leash.

. . . Out into the open country, no matter where, so long as the highway is good. Faster and faster yet! He is drunk, drunk with motion and air and speed! Yes, the man has spoken well, this car takes hills like an—h'angel like twenty devils! . . . Faster and faster yet. No idea of turning back. Turn back?—why, who ever turns back?—one just goes on! . . . On and on, and

nothing else matters. Phantom shadows leap out of the darkness on either side; trees, hedges, cottages —he passes them like a flash. Two streaming circles of light illuminate the road in front. The wind roars and whistles about his ears—but it rushes the same way as he, pushing from behind, aiding his flight. . . .

On and on. . . .

A song beats itself out from the steady throb of the wheels—(what had been the matter with the wheels of the train?). It rings triumphantly through his brain; will not be silenced:

. . . Tenderest voices cry "turn again",
Red lips tarnish the scabbarded steel.
High hopes fade on a warm hearthstone,
He travels the fastest who travels alone! . . .

. . . Down to Gehenna or up to the Throne,
He travels the fastest who travels alone!

. . . He travels the fastest who travels alone! . . .

The other lines die away, but this last journeys with him, mingling with the hum of the car. . . .

. . . He travels the fastest who travels alone . . .

Yes, the wind is with him now!

Suddenly, for no apparent reason, the engine slowed down and stopped.

"I've run away from Nan!" said Tony aloud. Had he not said it aloud he would not have believed it.

"Yes, I've run away from Nan!"

Then the full horror of the thing smote him; Good God, what sort of a man was he, first to elope with a girl and then desert her?

Well, he must just get back in double-quick time! He looked at his watch—ten minutes past eight. He had been over an hour on the road.

She would never forgive him. Never. It would be past nine before he returned. Had he been quite mad, tearing along in this devil-may-care fashion? If the car hadn't stopped——

Why had the car stopped?

. . . It took exactly five minutes thoroughly to convince himself that a leakage had occurred which would take about a week to repair. The forty horse-power Rolls-Royce would gallop no more that night.

Tony sat down by the side of the road and tried to get some shelter from the hedge. His feet dangled into the ditch. The worst of the gale had abated, and thin grey rain fell in fitful gusts. He was damp and chilled and covered with grime. He could not get on. He could not go back. And not one tiny rag of self-respect remained with which to protect himself. Nan was in a strange hotel, alone, waiting for him, trusting him. And he was here.

Pierrot was face to face with his soul, and didn't like the look of it!

Perhaps a passing motorist might take note of his plight and slow down. Meanwhile, he turned up his coat-collar and stared at the dripping branches opposite. The moon was shrouded. Once she peeped at him, but this he did not see; she glimmered palely over a torn bit of veiling, and just caught sight of him sitting under the hedge.

Such a poor, wretched, forlorn little Pierrot!

And withal, curiously happy!

. . . For this was he born, to commit follies; to rush singing through space, then drop, a miserable little heap of nothingness, upon the wet, brown earth. For

this was he born, to be free, and an idler, an outcast, and a penitent!—for this was he born Pierrot!

. . . A distant hum. Two specks of light. And the magician appeared who was to free him; a leather-clad magician with great goggling eyes, and otherwise no face at all.

He hailed Tony with a friendly "Hullo!"

"Hullo,"—mournfully.

"Anything wrong?"

"Everything."

The magician dismounted and played for a quarter of an hour with the Rolls-Royce. Tony watched him.

"'Um! This'll be a long job. We'd better drive to the nearest town, send a man from the works to fetch the car, and you come along with me."

"Which way?"

"London."

"No good." Tony let his head sink back into the obscurity of his coat-collar, and prepared himself for a night's vigil amongst the puddles.

"Where are you for, then?"

"Dover."

"Well, but——" the magician was puzzled. "You can't stop here till to-morrow morning. And you're off the main track, so it's not likely another car will happen to pass. And on such a night. I took the wrong turn myself. We're nowhere near a station. You wouldn't catch a local train, anyhow. Mine is a racing car; I can run you up to town by about ten. You might find a train at Charing Cross. Or you might—— Oh, hang it! Come long!"

Tony went along.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE CURSE OF THE THIRTEENTH FAIRY

THE sticks were damp. All the chambermaid's coaxing would not induce more than a wispy trail of smoke to rise from the black wilderness of coals underneath. At last she gave it up.

"I'll fetch you some hot water, Madam."

Nan jumped, and a hot, tingling blush engulfed her neck and cheeks. This form of address was new to her.

"Yes, please. I should like a wash."

The chambermaid vanished.

Nan looked at the massive gilt chandelier. At the dark, heavy furniture. At the drab wallpaper, and the window so obscured by blinds and wire and muslin that one could but dimly guess at what lay beyond. She looked, too, at the framed copy of hotel regulations on the wall, at the weird and fearsome ornaments decorating the plush mantelpiece. She did not look at the huge, canopied double bed. She sat down on it instead, and thought of the numberless couples, solidly married in the sight of God and their relations, who had lain in that room and consecrated it. The air was murky with their horrified ghosts.

. . . Marriage. She was not quite clear in her mind whether that was to be part of the future programme, or not. When she had telephoned Tony, she just didn't care. And now she could not bring herself to ask him; the question simply refused to pass a barrier at the back of her throat.

It would be nice, thought Nan wistfully, to call someone "husband", and feel he was strong and able to look after you.

Like Tony?—well, of course, like Tony. . . .

She sprang to the ground and, crossing to the door, flung it impatiently open; the chambermaid was very tardy with that hot water!

A terrific bumping and lurching down the corridor; people were moving into the room opposite Number Seventy-one.

"Excuse me, Madam!"—the perspiring porter swerved in time to prevent the corner of the largest trunk making a temporary stoppage in Nan's eye. A smaller, flatter trunk followed the first, then a hat-box, then a dressing-bag—all new, very shiny and very new, flushed with the pride of their first labels. After the luggage appeared the owners, also very new; she radiant in pale grey, he tenderly bending to remove a few grains of rice that had lingered in the folds of her veil. They had been married that day, and cared not who knew it!

. . . Nan stole back into her room, and closed the door. It did not matter now about the chambermaid and the hot water.

Pooh! What if these people *had* entered matrimony at two o'clock: St. George's, Hanover Square; wedding-cake from Buszard's?—These laws were all obsolete! Hers, Nan's, was the more glorious portion; boldly to throw in her lot with the Pioneers, to set the world at naught, cast off the trammels, be at one with the free sisterhood—the Utopians—the Lovers of the Future!

. . . Fie on you, Principal Girl! Faint-hearted already? You are not of the stuff of which an Adventuress is made! . . . Throw back your head, Principal Girl, and enter the fight with a smile on your lips, for the earth henceforth must be to you a battlefield!

But Nan knew now; knew that though she had believed in Tony's wonderful theories, though she still

throbbed response to the colour and the music of his visions, yet it was not for her to put them into practice. She had not been armoured and equipped for it. Her dim, early ideal of happiness resolved itself into a country-house, and soft shaven lawns, and two children playing in the sunshine, and—someone—coming home to her at six o'clock every evening. Deep down in her heart this picture still held good. For under these circumstances, she felt that within her which could hold and fascinate a man. Out in the winds she knew herself helpless.

Her mind leaped back from point to point like a pebble doing ducks and drakes along the surface of the water. . . .

The old upbringing, the old outlook upon life, the old narrow conventions, came rushing in upon her, wave upon wave, breaking down the slight barriers erected of late years by Progress and the New Era. What chance had these barriers against seventeen years' training and whole generations of instinct behind?

. . . Like a pebble doing ducks and drakes along the surface of the water, her mind leaped back, back to the garden, and the four walls that surrounded it, and the cords of the swing which would not permit of a peep over the walls. . . .

. . . "So-and-so has gone wrong!"—and So-and-so was swallowed up for ever in the outer blackness; one did not see her, did not speak of her. . . .

"Nan, you mustn't read that book."

"Why not?"

"It isn't fit for you." . . .

. . . And little memories of Nan Hartmann being hurried from a lit theatre into the waiting brougham, bidden not look to the right or the left for fear of seeing —what?

"Never mind!" . . .

All this had come and gone without really entering into the scheme of things. *She* was the Principal Girl; *she* was safe behind the walls; *she* had breakfast, lunch and dinner, and a maid to fetch her from parties after dark.

. . . How far had she travelled since then?

. . . Had the garden been the world, and was she now an outcast, one of those Other People of whom one whispered with bated breath?—or was she now of the world, the pulsing, living world—and the garden standing tiny and insignificant down a back lane?

Impossible to tell! The limelight man had muddled his colours: Good and Evil, truth and lies, happiness and sorrow, green limelight and golden—all blurred into one kaleidoscopic mass.

. . . What would Connie say when she heard, and Aunt Bertha, and—and her mother? Nothing. She simply would not exist any longer.

Only that one did go on existing—somehow.

How?

There was Tony. Tony would always love her, always stand by her! Would he?—Tony seemed to have shrunk to very tiny proportions. And he had been twenty minutes late at Charing Cross, and then bungled with the strap of the rugs. . . .

If Tony ever failed her——"He won't! I've no right even to think it! Why, he loves me." . . .

If Tony ever failed her, what then?

"He loves me!"

Quite irresponsibly, the Tired Queens paced before her, figures of mist and the lamplights, up and down, to and fro, as they had done the night of the Ballet. To and fro, up and down, with painted lips and dull, mournful eyes!—Witnesses.

Nan flung back her head with a proud little smile.

"What nonsense! Of course Boy is different!" . . . and a murmur rose from the ranks of the Tired Queens, like some echo from the past, and lo! They were each of them saying with a proud little smile: "Of course—Boy—is different!" . . .

"Your hot water, Madam."

Nan scrambled off the bed. The room was chilly; her limbs felt stiff and numb. Very slowly she took the can from the hand of the chambermaid. Very slowly poured the water into the basin, dipped her fingers in.

Found it half-cold. . . .

"I can't!"

With a laugh that had not quite made up its mind whether to be a sob, she tossed on her coat and cap, snatched up her suit-case, fled through the passages, down the four flights of stairs. She had to pass the door of the lounge, it was closed; on the other side, Tony, smoking his cigarette, impatiently awaited her coming. There was nobody in the hall. She crept through the wide-open portal, out into the street, glancing fearfully from right to left. The violence of the wind nearly knocked her down. Thank goodness, the station was only just over the road!

"When is the next train to London?"

"Due at eight o'clock, Miss—the last one up. You've got nearly half an hour's time."

The Ladies' Third-class Waiting-room was empty, half-dark. Nan stole in; curled herself up on one of the hard wooden benches. A train-whistle shrieked in the distance. . . .

. . . And the Thirteenth Fairy smiled yet once more!

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE SAUSAGE-SHOP

"JUNIOR"—the ventriloquist stopped short in the act of spreading on his face a thick layer of No. 3½ grease-paint, and regarded his small co-actor steadily—"Junior, concerning a certain subject, what is your honest opinion of me?"

"That you're a damned fool!" came the prompt reply, in a cracked voice curiously like Johnny's own.

"Thanks, Junior!"—with a sigh; "and quite right, too! I *am* a damned fool. Because even if she weren't married there'd be somebody else; there always is somebody else where I'm concerned. So I'll take your advice, John Junior, my lad, and just think no more about it."

With which the speaker started thinking about it in such good earnest, that when ten minutes later someone rapped at the door of his dressing-room, he was not a whit further advanced than he had been before.

Enter, then, the Manager of the Empyrium, large and glossy, wearing a waistcoat such as d'Orsay himself might have sported with pride; his hat, shining like the sun, tilted just two inches further to the back of the head than was customary. In those two inches lay the insignia of his office.

"Look here, Angel, I'm in a terrible state, nearly off my head." Dan Raymond sank languidly into an arm-chair and, with half-closed eyes, puffed at a cigarette. He called everybody "Angel", from Duchess to programme-girl and the Duchess liked it till she heard him address the programme-girl!

"What's up now?" inquired Johnny sympathetically.

"That Hungarian two-plates-and-a-fiddle chap won't go on at ten-forty-five. Says it's too late. Would you mind if I stuck you last but one on the bill, and gave him your place, directly after Fifi Fifine?"

"Oh, good Lord, no!" Johnny gave way to gentle irony: "Shove me wherever you please! First turn—why not?—or, if you like, I'll appear at the end of the show with the Anthem, and perform while the audience dive about for their hats. I'd like it."

"Thanks, awfully, old man! I knew you wouldn't mind. Wish they were all like you. Oh, and by-the-bye, the staff and artists are getting up a little fund by subscription—for the Manager, you know—surprise for his birthday—little memento of their esteem and gratitude and all that. What may I put you down at?—two guineas?"

"For the Manager, eh?"

"Yes. It's to be a surprise for him. Touching, very! My idea!"

Johnny grinned as he signed his name for the proposed sum.

"When *is* your birthday?"

"Oh, soon, I think. As soon as I can make it. I'm awfully hard up, and——"

A bouquet of crimson lilies, apparently propelled by no human agency, came whizzing through the half-open door and sank to rest in a distant corner. "These horrid vegetables! I tell you I will have them no more all over my room!"—and a basket of spotted orchids suffered the same fate. They were followed, less violently, by Fifi Fifine herself, exquisitely gowned in pale mauve embroidered pyjamas.

"I give to you my lovely flowers, Mr. June,"—graciously.

"Thanks so much!"

"My dear little lady," cried Raymond, "do you know the time? You ought to be in the wings by now."

Fifi took no more notice of the Manager than if he had been an earwig!—perhaps less. Seating herself on an overturned clothes-basket, she addressed her conversation exclusively to the ventriloquist.

"I do not appear to-night? Have you heard? Is it news?"

"Not appear?—what the devil—look here, Angel, you mustn't play us these tricks. Listen—the Good-fellow Troupe are taking their call already. Cut along, quick!"

Fifi tucked one leg beneath her, and went on talking to an intensely amused Johnny.

"No. I do not appear. There is nothing wrong. Nothing at all. The curtain rises—no Fifi Fifine! *Voilà tout!*"

"But hang it, you can't do that. What about your contract? Do try and make her see sense, June!"

One of the stage hands came tearing along the passage.

"Where's the boss?—Where's Mr. Raymond? Please, sir, they've played the opening bit to Number Nine twice already, and——"

"Heavens above! Who'd be a manager?—I'll chuck it and enter the Church to-morrow!" Raymond was sufficiently disturbed to throw away his half-smoked cigarette, and rise ponderously from his chair.

"'Phone through that they're to play 'In the Shadows' till ready." Fifi gave a little laugh. "Out with it, Fifi—what's the trouble?"

"But nothing, *cher ami*, nothing at all. I shall not be missed—oh, no! The American Rag-Time Girl, Mamie Loo, she will please the audience better. She is billed in big black letters—oh, bigger than Fifi Fifine."

"Is that all?"—with a mighty sigh of relief. "Now you go on as usual, my dear, and don't worry about

Mamie Loo. She's nobody. I didn't see the bills this week, and there's been a mistake. She ought to be screwed in small next to the Biograph. I'll see to it. Only, for God's sake, get a move on now!"

The sound of stamping and clapping was faintly borne up from below. Fifi, all smiles, blew a kiss to the Manager and tripped off. In the doorway she brushed against a slender, blue-serge figure.

"May I come in, Johnny?"

"By Jove, it's Nan!" Johnny gripped her cordially by the hands, pulled her into the room, plumped her on a chair, and introduced Dan Raymond, all in a breath.

"But I thought you were in Bournemouth and—— Bless me, child, you're sopping wet! Tom," to his own attendant, "bring a glass of port, quick! Wherever do you come from, Nan?"

"Dover!" Nan's eyes were shining; deep purple shadows had painted themselves underneath. She undid her jacket and tossed it jauntily to the ground. Johnny noticed how her fingers shook.

"What were you doing at Dover?"—grimly.

"Eloping!"—she spoke fast and feverishly. "I've run away from home, Johnny, and now I'm lost in London and without a friend! Isn't it pathetic? Are you going to point a finger of scorn at me, or——Oh, don't look at me in that stern-father fashion—it makes me want to laugh!"

Johnny continued to frown; he couldn't make head or tail of the business. Nor did he understand Nan in this reckless mood.

Tom brought in a glass of port. Nan drank it off at a gulp. It sent the colour flying to her cheeks. The Manager offered her a cigarette, which she accepted, blowing great clouds of blue smoke between herself and Johnny's accusing eyes.

"Where's Tony?" asked the latter suddenly, thinking thereby to gain the key of the riddle.

"Tony's in Dover. Funny, isn't it? He's in the lounge of the Harbour Hotel, waiting for me to come downstairs. But perhaps by now he's grown tired of waiting. He——"

The door was burst open once more. Tony entered like a whirlwind.

"Johnny, old chap, I——"

Then he caught sight of Nan.

"You!"

His exclamation cut jaggedly through the air. In the heavy silence that succeeded it, could be heard the distant tripping music of Fifi's dance, the swelling murmur which always seems to rise from even a silent audience, the shuffle of many feet, the chink of glasses next door, where the Goodfellow Troupe were standing drinks. The call-boy's voice echoed down the passages; the rattle of vehicles outside drifted up as from a street of dreams. Sitting bolt upright on the dresser, Johnny Junior goggled knowingly at the company. Between the drooping lids of Dan Raymond's eyes, a vivid blue gleam was discernible. . . .

"Please, Mr. Raymond, Miss Jossy Vernon wants to see you for a moment—something about her entrance."

Regretfully the Manager rose to his feet and lumbered from the room. Nan, who had had time to recover herself, flashed at Tony an odd little smile.

"I didn't think you'd run me to earth so soon, Boy!"

"Run you to earth?"

Tony looked more hopelessly bewildered than ever. Then it struck him that Nan might be striving to throw Johnny off the scent. He made an attempt to play up to her.

"You—you—wrote that you might be here to-night, and——"

"Stow all that humbug," said Johnny curtly. "What have you two been up to? Come, Tony, make a clean breast of it."

"Mind your own business, can't you?" the Boy turned on him fiercely, glad to find any outlet for his pent-up emotions.

Johnny was about to retort when the sight of Nan's white face stopped him. He spoke more quietly:

"I don't want to ask any questions. There'll be plenty of people to ask questions. But I can't do anything till you tell me——" he hesitated. Nan's eyes looked straight into his.

"It's all right, Johnny," she said.

"Ah! Then do your people know you are in town?"

"They expected me back this afternoon."

"You haven't written—wired?"

"N-no!"

"Then where are you sleeping to-night?"

"I—I don't know." Suddenly she was aware of being very tired; her assumption of bravado had fallen away like a mantle.

"I say, June"—a mop of black, tangled hair and an enormous nose were thrust in at the door—"Raymond says you have to me given up your time. It is by Jove awfully jolly good of you. Come and have a drink before I go on?"

Then Tony had a startling lapse of manners.

"Yes," he burst out. "Go, for God's sake!"

And Johnny, an intruder in his own dressing-room, understood—and went.

. . . "Girl, Girl, forgive me!" Tony flooded her in a vehement torrent of remorse. "I don't know what to say. . . . I was a cad—a brute—a beast! I must have been temporarily off my chump—and when I came round, I almost went mad again thinking of you stuck alone out there. Pitch into me, do!—though you can't

call me much worse than I've called myself. I thought it best to come straight to Johnny—borrow his car or something—there's not another train till ever so late, and then a slow one. Thank God you've come after me."

"Come after you?" Nan dashed away his hands. Her eyes blazed. "How dare you? Is it likely I'd come after you—anywhere? I thought you were in Dover."

"Then what in thunder are you doing up here?"

"I—I——" she hung her head, her fit of passion evaporating as swiftly as it came. "I ran away from you."

"Ran away from me?"—incredible, this!

"Yes. I slipped out of the hotel whilst you were in the lounge; caught the last train up. It was so cold; and I didn't know where to go—so I came to Johnny. Boy, I—I couldn't!"

"That's evident!"—he began to pace the room in great agitation. "If I'd known that I was so obnoxious to you——" he started bitterly; then swung off on to a fresh track: "Oh, Girl, you might have told me; you might have trusted me." Fury broke out again, youthful and uncontrolled. "Good God, to run away from me as if I were the vilest scum——" words failed him.

Nan was about to murmur once more: "I'm sorry", when, in mocking garb, Truth shook his cap and bells before her eyes. . . .

"You—you—ran away—from me—too!"

Tony winced, and turned sharply to the window. He had forgotten.

. . . "Boy."

Their glances met fully. And they laughed . . . for it really was rather funny. But the laughter died down again, and then there was nothing left.

Nan did not ask him why he had fled from the Harbour Hotel. Perhaps she did not want to know.

"Girl," at last, in an awed voice; the voice which one adopts when speaking of the dead. "Girl, have we made a failure out of our love, after all?"

"Yes, Boy!"

"Why? Why?"

"Well," said Nan, "just—oh, Tony, just because! I suppose."

"I thought we were different, you and I! We planned—do you remember?"

"Don't start 'do you remembering'!"—quickly.

He stopped. Stared blankly before him.

"I *did* love you!"—puzzled. Then he recollected himself: "I *do* love you——"

"No, Tony. I think not."

Tony thought of the night he had proposed to Nan; the night on which he proudly wrapped up his dream in a brown paper parcel, and knotted it with string—all for its greater safety. And now, when he opened the parcel, the dream was no longer there. . . .

He swung round on his heel, met Junior's impish grin, and savagely turned the puppet's face to the wall.

"We should have done it before! Snatched our Heaven whilst we still wanted it! Nobody loved like we did—nobody could. And we missed it. Let it go without—without—— You hadn't the pluck."

Poor Pierrot! He had so hoped that this time he was really in love!

"Sometimes I wonder," mused Nan.—"We've been such firelight lovers! Every time I think of you, it's connected with shadows and the deep red glow in the hollow of the coals. If we could have got out into the sun—the pure, fresh, early morning sun—and had all our fancies and troubles swept away, and the corners

of our minds cleaned out! Perhaps then—I don't know! —but we've been such firelight lovers!"

Johnny entered abruptly. "Look here, Nan," he began, throwing himself into the Guardsman's uniform in which he always performed. "You'd better go to Sadie and stay the night there. She's at home, I know—Andrew's spending the evening with that crank Wymondham. Give her the truth of the matter, whatever it is. She won't be hard. And she'll help you throw dust in Andrew's eyes. We don't want any Heavy Hoof in this business. I've wired your people: 'Staying till to-morrow with Sadie Morrice. Unexpected supper-party.—Nan.' It's a bit late in the day, but still"—he jerked his arms into the scarlet coat and pulled on a pair of spurred boots. "I've ordered my car to take you down to Streatham. You'll find it outside whenever you're ready." Mirror in hand, he gave final touch to his eyebrows. "Come in, Tom! What is it?"

"Autograph albums, please, sir. Seven. Just sent round. And would you mind signing your name? With a suitable sentiment!"

"Suitable sentiment be blowed!" With a radiant face, Johnny scribbled his name seven times: "Beastly nuisance!" The little proofs of popularity made him as happy as a schoolboy.

"Number Eleven just put up on the board, sir."

"All right—I'm ready!" The ventriloquist hunted frantically for his sword, caught Junior up to his shoulder, turned at the door to say "Good-bye, little Nan. Don't go till I come back, Tony; I want a word with you!" and his spurs jingled down the passage.

The two scarcely heeded him. Their destiny was to muddle things up; Johnny's to put them straight again, even as autumn followed spring, and spring trod on the heels of autumn.

. . . "Girl, what are you going to do?"

"What he said, I suppose. Go to Sadie."

"I don't mean to-night. I mean altogether." It seemed so impossible to imagine their lives apart.

Nan played with the sticks of grease-paint on the table, arranged them in patterns.

"I'm going to marry the Other Man!"—till she said the words, the notion had not even occurred to her. Now, clear as daylight, it shone as the only possible course of action.

"Girl! ! ! But you don't love him!"

"He loves me. And his love will last. He said, oh, long ago, that if ever I want him, he's always there. He *will* always be there, too. He's generous, and good-hearted and not a fool——"

"Say that he's clean and sober and trustworthy while you're about it! . . . Nan——"

"Oh, I know, Boy, I know!—but I can't go back to the old, unsettled life—I just can't! Everyone has found their groove and made themselves comfortable in it. I'm left out. I won't be left out. If I marry him, I shall please people; do the right thing. I've tried the other and failed. And I like him, really. I don't shudder or recoil from his touch, or anything of that sort. I suppose I ought to, but I don't. And——"

"And what, dear?"—gently.

"I've got a sloppy and altogether untwentieth-century wish that he can satisfy. I want a child. A baby-boy of my own. Oh, Tony, think of it!"

He thought of it—and suddenly became conscious of an overwhelming tenderness for her.

"Girl! Girl!"—his arms were crushing her, his voice husky with passion. "Girl, it's not too late. Let's still make a fight for it, you and I!"

"But I don't want to fight—I want to be safe." The speech came with a sort of wail—and Tony understood

at last. He had never allowed for the race from whence she sprang: the swarthy, quick-eyed race who cherish their wives, clothe them in silk and diamonds, guard them jealously from knowledge and contamination and suffering.

. . . His arms loosened their grip. It was she now who clung to him.

"Boy, all the things we used to do together—your names for me—and the bits of funniness—and our dreams—You won't share them with anyone else, will you?"

He reassured her. "The Cottage by the Sea becomes an Electric Picture Palace from this hour!"—with a quick, whimsical smile. Then, softly: "Don't be afraid, Kiddie darling, you'll always occupy a niche in my heart."

Nan had a swift vision of his heart as a sort of crematorium, with long rows of niches, each containing a carefully-labelled urn. She began hysterically to laugh. A clock chimed out eleven. In a few minutes Johnny would be back.

"I must go."

They regarded each other uncertainly. Both felt as if they were playing their parts on some tremendous stage. Somehow they must live up to the solemnity of the moment. The Principal Boy and Principal Girl were bidding each other farewell—no jarring note must mar the scene for future memories.

Silver-winged and shod with mist and silver, First Love flitted out of Nan's life, bearing away in her arms little bundles of words that Boy and Girl would need no more: "Togetherness", "You and I", "We are different to Other People", "One day". First Love departed, scattering compensations in her flight. Nan would find a new smile to wear around her lips, a smile that meant: "I know!" Nan would cease to become a bore to

Society at large. And joy and sorrow, those wild gipsy children, would henceforth keep primly within bounds. Many of these compensations did First Love scatter in her flight, but Nan did not stay now to pick them up. She looked wistfully at First Love—"Must you go?"—what then?

After the pantomime, the Sausage-shop! . . .

Sausages, and more sausages, and sausages in great variety, and all sorts and kinds of sausages. Sausages are excellent things in their way, yet Nan was not the first who held the inevitable curtain apart with both hands, straining for a last, last glimpse of the færy glitter of the Transformation Scene.

. . . Violins only—let the brass instruments be mute!—the Principal Boy and the Principal Girl are bidding each other farewell. Nan felt vaguely that her eyes ought by rights to be full of tears.

. . . Tony seemed about to speak—then, roughly, violently, he kissed her again and again, as if trying to wring from her mouth all he had gained from the past, all he had lost in the future.

He pushed her away from him at length. She turned and walked to the door. Out in the passage she put the back of her hand to her eyes, and was surprised to find that they were full of tears after all. . . .

CHAPTER XXIX

FOLLY

ANDREW took his evening clothes with him to the City on Monday the eighth of March. He could dress at the office, have a chop somewhere, and go straight on to Wymondham's "At Home". Or else he might have the

chop first, and then dress. Or if he came home after the chop, and Sadie had his garments laid out ready for him—No, there wouldn't be time for that. Unless he went without the chop, and trusted to luck and Wymondham's hospitality for a good supper. In that case, there would be time to come home and dress—if he took a taxi; but, then, for the cost of the taxi he could have his chop, and some pudding and cheese besides.

Finally, Andrew came back to his first decision.

Sadie, thrown on her own resources, found herself unable to settle down to any occupation. She was vaguely uneasy, and correspondingly restless—too restless to read. Towards nine o'clock she wandered up to her bedroom and amused herself by arranging her hair, first one way, then another. She parted it and draped it, à la Cléo de Mérode, over the ears. No, it looked wrong, somehow, and her ears were too pretty to be hidden! Cleopatra fashion, then?—with a great enamelled drop shining between the eyes; Sadie laughed aloud at the result: a Paris mannequin masquerading as the Sphinx. So she piled the pale gold curls high on her head, and crowned them with a tortoiseshell comb. Yes, the Marie Antoinette style was decidedly becoming, were it not for the impertinent little nose tilting up defiance at the dignified erection.

Finally, she dressed her hair in three big puffs, one over the forehead, one on either side of the head.—She was a Pierrette now, a whimsical Pierrette, with arched eyebrow and pouting baby lips.

"This suits me best of all," decided Sadie.

Propping her chin on her hands, she gazed earnestly into the mirror, and gave herself up to thought—a proceeding which of late she had sternly discouraged. A married woman engaged in a reckless flirtation does well not to think; her meditations are bound to lead her to a *cul-de-sac*. . . .

Why had Andrew been invited to witness Wymondham's play, and she left out? Why?

"Please, Madam, Mr. Wymondham is downstairs."

"*Who* is downstairs?"

"Mr. Wymondham, please, Madam."

"Are you sure, Ada?"

Ada reflected for an instant.

"Yes, Madam, quite sure."

What mad caprice was this? Was Andrew dead? The house in Belgrave Square burnt down? The whole entertainment a fake? Her brain in a whirl, Sadie stepped into a white-and-gold garment that might have been a tea-gown, or a nightgown, or a ball-dress, or Greek drapery, or anything else a fertile mind could suggest; then, catching up the skirts with one hand, she ran swiftly down the stairs. Vicomte was awaiting her in the hall.

"Don't say 'Good-evening'! Tell me why you are here!"

He looked at her admiringly: "To paint you as Folly, astride of a table, with the broken bits of a heart in your lap—petulant because you cannot fit them together again!"

"And you left your guests and your house and your entertainment simply to tell me all that?" She led the way into the sitting-room.

"Oh, my guests!" Wymondham dismissed them with a shrug. "I waited till the curtain rose, then escaped. The butler has the keys of the wine-cellar; the page knows how to whistle for a taxi. Of what use am I, except to inflict the awful penalty on each visitor of saying 'Good-bye; I've enjoyed myself so much'?"

"So you slipped away to comfort my loneliness?"

"Yes,"—slowly, "partly that, and partly to tell you about that little fantasy of mine which is being performed to-night."

"*For Husbands Only*?"

"Exactly. You were indignant at being excluded from the audience. If you'll light a cigarette and promise to keep very quiet, I'll give you a detailed account from beginning to end."

Sadie squatted obediently on a low stool, folded her hands and looked meekly up at him.

"Behold the disciple at the feet of the master!" Then: "I thought you wouldn't be able to resist showing me the final proof of your cleverness!"

Vicomte loftily ignored this piece of impertinence; his usual languid manner concealed some suppressed excitement. His eyes flickered greener and lighter than she had ever seen them.

"You know my drawing-room," he began. "It has been converted into a miniature theatre—white and silver and pale grey: 'le Théâtre Polichinelle.' One half of the space is curtained off for the audience; about thirty men, lounging in rose-brocade armchairs. In the centre of the first row I have placed your husband."

"Do you so value his criticism?"

"I do indeed."

She remained silent, puzzled.

He continued: "Three steps lead up to the stage. A bell tinkles; 'Truth' slips between the grey plush curtains, and from the second step speaks his prologue:

"Truth, garbed as a jester.

"Mournfully he explains his attire; no more is he lofty and pure and noble, dreaded by the gay and flighty. No, they employ him now as their principal ally in mischief and intrigue. In these complicated times it is the fashion to shield your little peccadilloes by boldly admitting the truth about them—the last thing anyone is likely to believe! Therefore he wears the cap and bells. Do you follow me?"

. "Perfectly."

"Truth makes his bow and disappears. The curtain rises on the first of the three little episodes which compose the extravaganza. Columbine—Pierrette—Folly—which shall we call her?——"

"Folly!" murmured Sadie.

"Folly is discovered playing *la grande dame*, surrounded by jewels, feathers, hats. We learn from her that three months ago she has thrown love out of the window to wed with riches—dismissed Harlequin and become the wife of Pantaloon. The latter, of course, thinks himself beloved. He enters, extremely agitated; his entire wealth, sewn up in seventeen white cotton stockings, has been stolen from him. He is poor. 'Never mind, darling,' says he. 'Nothing matters as long as we have each other!' I'm afraid"—Wymondham broke off—"that I plagiarized this scene! The dialogue isn't my own, but echoed, word for word, from—a tale once told to me."

He flashed a lightning glance at Sadie. She opened her rosy mouth and puffed out a cloud of pale blue smoke.

"It's very interesting. Don't stop!"

"Pantaloon embraces Folly, and departs. In a rage she stamps on her feathers and toys! So she has given up love, and gained nothing in return?—a pretty trick, forsooth, for Fate to have played her. Well, she wasn't going to sit down under it—not she! Clown, her servant, is instantly dispatched to summon Harlequin back to her side. The curtain falls."

Vicomte paused. There was no sign, no movement of any kind from his listener; merely the floating rings of blue smoke which at regular intervals clouded round her head.

. . . "The curtain rises, after three minutes' interval, on the second episode—a fortnight later. Pantaloon,

poor dupe, is making Harlequin a welcome guest at his table, urging him to drink, applauding his wit, calling in his servants to dance and sing. Folly watches with bright, impish eyes. Pantaloon rises to leave the room, to fetch a rare brand of wine with which to toast his visitor. 'Knock or cough when you come back', cries Harlequin, laughing. 'I might be kissing your wife, and I shouldn't like you to catch us in the act!' 'Ha, ha!' Pantaloon chuckles heartily at the joke. Scarcely has the door closed behind him when Harlequin and Folly are in each other's arms. He kisses her. A loud cough outside the door, the rapping of knuckles—'Wait a minute!' With a last soft kiss, Harlequin tiptoes elaborately back to his chair.—'Now you can come in!' Pantaloon re-enters with the wine. 'Well', with a sly wink, 'did I give you sufficient warning?' 'Quite, thanks!' They all three fill their glasses to the brim. 'Truth', in motley, shows a mournful visage round the side of the wings. The end of the second episode.

"We come to the third and last—very short, lest the spectators should grow weary. Pantaloon has gout; he cannot take his pretty young wife to the fair. Harlequin shall act as escort in his stead. Harlequin is delighted. They bid Pantaloon good-bye. 'We're not coming back!' declares Harlequin. 'Folly is so lovely to-night that I'm tempted to run away with her.' Folly falls in with his mood. 'Yes, indeed! Farewell, my husband, for ever!' She kisses Pantaloon, who laughs at the quips and jests of the absurd young people, and gives them a mock blessing. Exit Harlequin and Folly! Pantaloon, still smiling, is left alone on a slowly-darkening stage. 'Truth' appears to let down the curtain. A tableau shows Pantaloon at dawn, still waiting for them to return. And—that's all!"

Silence.

"What do you think of my play, Marquise?"

"It's very clever," pronounced Sadie gently, "very clever indeed, and must look quite charming framed in the grey and silver curtains. Have you hired professionals to fill the parts?"

"Yes. I meant that each point should be brought out."

Curiously she brought her gaze to bear on his finely-chiselled profile.

"You seem to have gone to a great deal of trouble and expense to open Andrew's eyes. Why not have simply told him the facts?"

"I never do anything simply. It leads to too many complications. Besides——"

"Besides, you once did me the honour of supping at 'Le Château en Espagne'. I told you of the title bestowed on me by Louis Seize—'Prince of Intrigue.' You doubted that my machinations would be effective in these times. I contradicted you; said that within six weeks I could, if I liked, contrive to part you from Andrew. Then you challenged me. I accepted the challenge——"

"And smashed a glass. Yes, I remember now!" She mused awhile. . . .

"I always knew your vanity was enormous,"—thoughtfully, "but that it could reach the point of sacrificing two lives——"

"Three, Marquise. You forget that my own is involved."

"How so?"

"Well, granted that Andrew realizes what he was meant to realize"—both were discussing the situation with as much outward coolness as if it were infinitely remote from themselves—"he can hardly fail us there, I think! He ought to be home in about half an hour. We must be gone by then."

"Indeed! Why?"

"When dealing with a man of Andrew's type—pardon me if I am personal—you have one great advantage—you always know exactly what he is going to do. He has his little packet of laws drawn up for every emergency: 'In the event of a one-handed hawker of bottles coming up the garden path and treading down the left-border pink double geranium, the correct thing to be done is——' etc."

Sadie made a little movement of impatience, her first. "Stick to the point, please."

Not quite sure of his ground, Vicomte apologized courteously:

"Forgive me. What I meant was that the present circumstances offer your husband two alternatives: either he'll denounce you, call me 'his friend who has betrayed him', and turn us both out of the house; or else he'll be tender and melting and Christmas-Carolly: 'My little wife, we've both been wrong! Let us start again'! . . . The first business would be boresome; the second would entail you spending the rest of your life with your head between his feet, which, in addition to being boresome, is also dusty. We'll escape them both if we are off now—before he returns."

"I'd rather stay, thanks."

"And brave it out openly? Certainly if you prefer it." Vicomte looked resigned. "One can get a certain amount of satisfaction from fighting a brick wall," he murmured; "there is none to be had from fighting blanc-mange. You only get your hands in a mess."

"And if I fell in with your plan," asked Sadie, "where do you propose to go?"

"That's for you to say, of course; Arabia? Buenos Ayres?—or Russia is rather fascinating, I am told. We could travel for a year or two, till——"

"Till you are tired of me."

"My dear Marquise"—he regarded her with a mocking little smile—"surely you don't want me to make vows of eternal constancy? If I'd wanted to indulge in that sort of thing, I'd have sought out a Young Ladies' Boarding Establishment, not the last thing in Modern Feminism!"

"Yes?"—sweetly. "It's a pity, then, that you passed by that boarding establishment. You'd have been a success there. You would have 'thrilled' and 'dazzled' them; you look *so* romantic; so true and noble and chivalrous! But for the last thing in Modern Feminism you're out of date. We know you and your type too well. And knowledge keeps us where constraint and ignorance kept our grandmothers—at home with the Andrews of this world!"

Wymondham experienced the mild shock of a gardener who, thinking he is digging in nice soft soil, runs his spade against a brick. He rose deliberately to his feet, and, placing his hands behind her neck, tilted her head back to meet his look.

"You are charming," said he, "and being a woman, want me to tell you so now, when every moment is precious, instead of during the eternities we shall spend together. Well—you are charming. And now, Marquise, now, Folly—we must go!"

She laughed up into his face. "But, my dear Harlequin, I'm not coming away with you!"

"Not?"—raising his eyebrows. "But I'm afraid there's no other course open to you. If it weren't melodramatic, I might say that I had forced your hand. How long," with sudden heat, "did you think I was going on like this? I've heard the overture sixty times—now we come to the opera!"

But Sadie regarded him unemotionally, and when she spoke, the lightness of her tones was replaced by a slow, biting emphasis.

"Men like you don't count. You just don't count—except for amusement. I've been amusing myself with you—have you grasped that? Very much in the same way as you must have amused yourself with dozens of—poor little devils. Women can do that now, because we know where to stop without burning our fingers. I might have gone on with our pretty game for a long time—if you hadn't brought things to a head with this wonderful cleverness of yours, and shown me how sick I am of you and your cult and your jargon and your pose. Why, there's nothing real about you, not one tiny scrap of solidness to grip on to!—just words and words and words! Emotions you call stale, scenes are plebeian, sentiment cheap, religion merely absurd, to be natural an effective pose! You——"

"Instead of hurling platitudes at my head," Vicomte interrupted, "you might run upstairs and pack your bag!"

"I *will* utter platitudes!"—Marquise was in a royal rage by now; she stamped her foot; she lashed him with her contempt. "I *will* emphasize the obvious: I will say that 'Circumstances alter cases', and quote ''Tis better to have loved and lost'! I'll even talk about the weather if I like! Why shouldn't I? I'll be enthusiastic over the coloured supplements in Pear's Annual! I'll be vulgar and commonplace and a Philistine! I'll read Longfellow! You've stifled me with your paradoxical epigrams, and languid, artificial, hyper-cultivated mask, and your world-weariness!—World-weariness? Yes!—but you don't commit suicide, do you? You don't *do* anything, ever! except—well, you've done it now, and a nice muddle you've made of things! Now keep quiet and let me think!" Oblivious of the fact that Wymondham had perforce been keeping quiet for the past seven minutes, Sadie withered him with a final glance, and, walking across to the window,

tried to focus her mind on the exact extent of the damage effected in her career by the "Prince of Intrigue".

A high wind rattled at the glass, and swayed the bushes in the carriage-drive hither and thither. Between their ghostly lines a four-wheeler could be perceived slowly jolting up to the house.

Sadie turned to her companion. "Your entertainment must be over," said she, a little catch in her breath, "for Andrew has come home."

CHAPTER XXX

PANTALOON

And Sadie was suddenly overcome by terror, icy, unreasoning terror of the little pink man now hidden by the shadow of the porch. The little pink man who *knew!*

"You and your intrigues! Oh, I—I believe I hate you!" Then, helplessly, as the latchkey was heard to scrape in the lock: "What am I to do?"

Wymondham did not reply; he reached up to replace on the mantelpiece a Dresden shepherdess which he had been closely examining. His hand shook slightly! . . . What new Andrew was about to make an appearance? An Andrew who raged? An Andrew who spluttered?—worse, an Andrew who wept?

"If he tries to be dignified, I shall laugh!"—with an attempt to regain his wontedly impassive attitude towards people and things. But another thought chased out the first—a little commonplace human thought quite unworthy of the great Alister Bertrand de Vaux Wymondham: "I wish I hadn't done it. . . ."

. . . And all the while Andrew was mounting the stairs. Ah, there was his step!

The two culprits in the boudoir did not stir. Neither did they look at one another. The door!—fascinated, they both watched the door!

Andrew entered, and, as was his wont, turned to close the door carefully behind him. At the sight of Wymondham, his jaw dropped, the pink in his face deepened.

"You! . . . here!" His discomfiture was so obvious that he, not the other, might have been the guilty person.

He shifted his gaze to his wife, where she stood motionless against the purple hangings. "Sadie, my dear!——" and was silent. . . .

Something flew with a crack against the glass—what was it?—only the tassel of the blind, that had suddenly dropped from her fingers. "If only he would get it over!" thought Sadie. She could cope with anything but the anguish of inaction. Andrew's peculiar manner dispelled that last faint hope that he might have missed the point of Wymondham's "Fantasy in three episodes, entitled *For Husbands Only!*"

Andrew made another rush. "Your play, Wymondham, it——" and stuck again.

What in the name of Heaven did all this indicate? Wymondham was utterly bewildered; was Morrice, after all, not a crystallized essence of the Wronged Husband? Had they under-rated him all this time? Did he conceal a thunderbolt up his sleeve?—and if so——

"I—er—thought your little drama quite excellent. The curtains—the curtains——"

Andrew blew his nose and murmured something about soda-water.

A spasm of cold fury shook the other man from head to foot. So they were to be kept on the rack, he and

Sadie? Very well, then! If that was the game to be played, then, by God, he could take a hand as well as Andrew!

"The curtains—well, of course, they are of the new school—implied effects, not held beneath your nose, so to speak. And the situation, what did you think of that? What is your opinion of—Pantaloon?"

Sadie held her breath. . . .

"For the moment," replied Andrew, with a certain quiet dignity, "I prefer not to discuss it—in front of my wife, you understand!" Then he became jerkily hilarious. "Come, we'll have a drink together, you and I, just to celebrate the occasion. Sadie, my dear, come to the fire. Pull your chairs up, both of you. Tut, tut! dear me!"

Sadie, after measuring out a couple of whiskies, sank into the chair that stood deepest in the shadow. She marvelled at the light, careless tones in which Vicomte was conversing with his host. To her it was ghastly, this show of friendliness and ease, when they all three knew . . . must know. . . .

Her face gleamed white and strained beneath the quaint Pierrette puffs of hair. She had never realized before that Andrew could be cruel, deliberately cruel. She began to admire him. . . .

"Do you hear that, Sadie!"

She started. "No—I wasn't listening."

"There's been a big boom in rubber on the Exchange. It's done me a lot of good, and may do more. I know a little woman who is fond of frocks and feathers!"—playfully.

She forced herself to smile. Did this mean that he was going to be noble and magnanimous?—heap coals of fire on her head?

. . . A soft patter of feet up the stairs. . . . Someone lingering outside the door of the boudoir

. . . then, at the sound of men's voices, the footsteps steal away again. . . .

Nobody noticed. The flow of talk rippled on, Vicomte acting as pilot. Now they touched on politics—now on gardening—then on some of the burning topics of the hour: music-halls on Sundays.

"I think it would be a good thing," Andrew declared firmly.

"Ah, you're a bit of a Bohemian." The clock had crept on to half-past eleven.

"Well, you see—I mean—I'm that sort of man!—I've got a temperament—I wear riding-boots on Sundays."

Sadie laughed. A queer, shrill laugh. Having once given way, she seemed quite unable to stop. Her shoulders shook and quivered and heaved with mirth. Helplessly, the two men watched her.

At last Wymondham said: "You're tired. Hadn't you better go to bed? I'll stay and talk to your husband."

His suggestion sounded careless and innocent enough, but it brought back with a rush all Andrew's queer nervousness.

"I think—we're both rather worn-out. If you'll excuse us——"

"You want me to go?" Vicomte stood upright.

"Oh no, please don't put it like that!—but——"

"I quite understand." So it was to prove an affair between husband and wife, and he, Wymondham, was being subtly informed that they had no further use for him on the scene of action. . . .

Just as well, perhaps! A climax was bound to be clumsy when less skilful wits than his own were involved. . . . That little matter concerning the medallion of Antoinette de Juste, when he and Monsignor—ah, it was delicious, but then those were other days. . . .

Gracefully, Vicomte made his adieus. As he bowed low over Sadie's hand, some fantastic shadow—perhaps cast by the boughs that swayed outside the window—caused her to see by his side the gleam of a rapier, on his hair a cloud of powder, and, above his ironically smiling mouth a black diamond patch. . . .

With a flourish of lace ruffles, he raised her fingers to his lips.

Then the fancy took flight again. . . .

"Good-bye, Vicomte."

"*Au revoir*, Marquise."

Unscathed, save for a tiny puncture on his vanity, the Prince of Intrigue took his departure.

What had promised to be the opera was, after all, but the sixty-first repetition of the overture; your dilettante rarely gets beyond that.

Directly his visitor was out of earshot, Andrew tumbled off his chest all that had been burdening it so heavily.

. . . "I couldn't tell him—how could I? when he was so particularly anxious for my criticism, and gave me the best seat, not excepting Lord Calfont, whom I noticed in the third row, and who sits on the Board of——. But never, since I went on the 'Change eleven years ago, have I been through such a day—literally rushed off my feet—no time for lunch—no time to rest. If I hadn't promised Wymondham, I'd have come straight home—and then I think I could have managed it if I'd had a straight-backed chair—but those deep-cushioned things— 'Pon my word, Sadie, how could I help it?"

Sadie's brain whirled. "Could you help what, Andrew? I can't follow you." Hope found a precarious foothold in her heart!

"I'm telling you, aren't I?—and then that man in the cap and bells spoke such long-winded rubbish—couldn't

make head or tail of it!—and to meet him here before I had time to construct something or other—find out from someone who *had* seen the play—it was very awkward—wouldn't have hurt his feelings for world's!—Though I think I put him off very cleverly every time the question cropped up. That was good, saying I wouldn't discuss it before my wife! Sure to have been something, well—rather! considering the title *For Husbands Only*. It was the call for 'Author' that woke me up, and——"

"Andrew, does all that rigmarole mean that you slept while the play was being performed?"

"Haven't I said so at least a dozen times?" demanded Andrew testily.

For the second time that evening was Sadie obliged to stroll away to the window to sort out the conflicting emotions that struggled within her for supremacy. Laughter first—irresistible, bubbling laughter. If ever any man had been given a chance to play hero that night, it was Andrew of the Heavy Hoof—Andrew, who had serenely slept with his little pink head pillowed on the very bomb so carefully prepared to destroy him. Well, there are some people who, persistently though you may set them up in the centre of the stage with full lime-light, can yet never enact any part but that of second walking gent.

Andrew is one of these! Peace be on him.

Then relief swept over her in great refreshing waves. Oh, the blessedness of feeling that life could roll on in the same old way! Not half an hour ago had she stood in the very spot where now she stood, watching Nemesis drive up in a four-wheeler. It was a pity to have thus upset herself; agitation renders the nose shiny.

Finally, Sadie made up her mind to play with fire no more—at any rate, not for a long, long time. Had not Andrew spoken of a rubber boom—and new frocks?

Meanwhile, the latter gentleman, having swallowed the camel, proceeded all of a sudden to strain at the gnat!

"May I ask—Sadie, turn round, please; I can't talk to your back."

"Yes, dear." She presented a sparkling face to the light.

"May I ask what Alister Wymondham was doing here, with my wife, and his own house full of visitors?"

"Perhaps he had an attack of author's nerves, and fled." Sadie was indifferent.

"That doesn't explain why he fled here!" protested Andrew, coming in with his rôle of injured husband after the audience had departed and the lights were turned down. "If I hadn't been so—so—confused, I'd have it out with him at once. What will the servants think? I don't like it, Sadie; I—I don't like it. I'm not angry, but I don't like it! And I shall make a point of seeing Wymondham to-morrow, and asking him what he means by it. Yes."

Sadie was roused to genuine alarm by the threat. Who knows, the bomb might yet explode if kicked about by a Heavy Hoof.

"Oh no, Andrew, don't do that. It—it didn't matter."

"But it does matter. Very much. A nice thing—alone with my wife. Alone with her all the evening!"

Nan walked in.

"Hullo, Andrew!"

"N—a—an!" Andrew bleated like a goat in his astonishment; "why, how long have you been in the house?"

"Oh, I've been here all the evening!"—mutely she pleaded with Sadie not to contradict. "I didn't want to go back to Bournemouth till to-morrow, wanted to cut a stupid whist-drive—and Rosenfelts had all their spare rooms occupied. You don't mind, do you, if I

spend the night here? You said last week I could drop in whenever I liked. I was unpacking my bag upstairs when you came."

Nan's eyelids were heavy with sleep; the shadows dark beneath them. She recited her speech in a low, monotonous voice, as if it had been learned by heart. Something inside her was drumming out: "I want to go to bed! I want to go to bed!" like a tired child.

"Yes, yes, of course you can stay. Always welcome. We're Bohemian here, quite Bohemian." Andrew beamed. Nan's presence banished that disturbing little tableau of Wymondham and Sadie duetting over the fire. He need really not bother now to speak to the former. Truth to tell, Andrew, in his capacity of critic, was rather anxious just at present to give the dramatist a wide berth.

"Why didn't you tell me that Nan was here?" he demanded of his wife.

"I opened my mouth three or four times, but you always interrupted me," declared Sadie, in meekly reproachful accents, and feeling very much like St. Elizabeth in the legend, whom a miracle twice saved from the wrath of a tyrannical husband.

Andrew apologized, yawned loudly, and apologized again: "Heigh-ho! I'm dead beat!"

"So am I," echoed Sadie, and "So am I," said Nan. . . . And they all three yawned in chorus.

"It's time we were in bed," urged Andrew. He remained behind to turn out the lights and bolt the doors. Sadie threw her arm round the younger girl's shoulders and led her upstairs.

"Sadie,"—breathlessly, "you weren't angry, were you, at what I said—about having been with you all the evening? I couldn't tell Andrew the whole story!—Did you mind?"

"No, dear, I didn't mind a bit.".

"And, Sadie, I'll tell you everything, only—can you wait 'till to-morrow morning? I feel somehow as if I couldn't get it clear to-night."

"Don't bother, then! We'll send Andrew off to the City early, and have breakfast in bed together." Sadie peeped into the spare room to see if everything needful were there, then:

"Good-night, Nan dear!"

"Good-night!" drowsily.

. . . Silence brooded over the house, cool and refreshing, like rain after drought. The Principal Girl lay in bed, feeling curiously at peace. It was good, after the pantomime, to wash off the paint and toss aside the spangled robe. Amidst the blurred, vague recollections of the day, one thought flashed out clear and distinct:

"My children can have it, anyhow. They shall be brought up to the new way from the beginning." . . . Then the thought drifted back again into a formless, tumbled chaos; she did not even remember what "it" was that she had missed and her children should have.

. . . Silence brooded over the house, cool and refreshing, like rain after drought. With hands clasped to form a pillow for one flushed cheek, the Principal Girl slept. . . .

THE CURTAIN FALLS!

BEHOLD the Sausage-shop! A lofty and expensive Sausage-shop—a veritable Harrod's Stores amongst Sausage-shops. Not to be insulting, we will call it a Sausage Emporium.

"I've never loved anyone but you!" whispers the Boy. It is the only thing to be said, and he has visited

the Sausage-shop very often during the past four years, in order to say it, here, at his ease, in the quaint Japanese sitting-room with its faint murmuring tints of grey and green and blue.

A vivid October sunset steals through the seven round windows, and lies in blood-coloured splashes on the shiny floor.

The Girl smiles, and then sighs. Regret can become a very soothing and pleasant luxury when one is warm and silk-clad; worshipped, deferred to, and—safe. Therefore the Girl sighs, and the Boy sighs, and they both murmur: "If only" . . . and are silent, watching memories creep past them on tiptoe.

"And our mutual friend Pierrot?" asks the Girl at length.

A whimsical little comedy, this; invented to bridge a slight difficulty that arose. For, of course, the Principal Boy could never admit to such inartistic behaviour as loving anyone but the Principal Girl!—and yet she knows, and he knows, and she knows he knows. . . .

Knows what? No, we will not breathe it, even amongst ourselves. Suffice it to say that the Boy tells her of all the Ardent Adventures, all the loves of yesterday and to-morrow, all the triumphs and declarations and desperations, that befall—their mutual friend Pierrot. And she is sympathetic and wise, and amused, as the case demands!

And then . . .

"I'll never love anyone but you!" whispers the Boy.

And she smiles—and sighs, and he sighs, and both murmur: "If only." . . .

They are very happy!

The Girl looks charming and her setting is charming, and she possesses that last and most wonderful charm of all—she belongs to the Other Man!

. . . The sun dips behind a bank of grey clouds. The Boy rises to go. The Girl accompanies him to the door. He runs down the steps—looks back at her where she stands for an instant, dark against the ruddy square of light. Then she closes the door, and moves slowly up the softly-carpeted stairs, past the first-floor landing, past her bedroom on the second floor—and at the top of the third flight a little barred gate has had to be erected. . . .

"My children can have it, anyhow! They shall be brought up to the new way from the beginning." . . .

. . . . .

The Boy is left in the grey mist-world outside. An army of hissing, swirling leaves are swept past him by a gust of wind—away, away, into the Never-Never Land. He is resentful; why should he always remain beyond the red cosy fires?—alone in the cold—why?

. . . Along the opposite pavement is heard the tip-tap of high heels, the light swish of a petticoat. He picks up his ears!—then, swift and silent as a fawn, darts across the road.

Pierrot is out on the quest again. . . .

THE END

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